John Wesley's Doctrine of Prevenient Grace in Missiological Perspective

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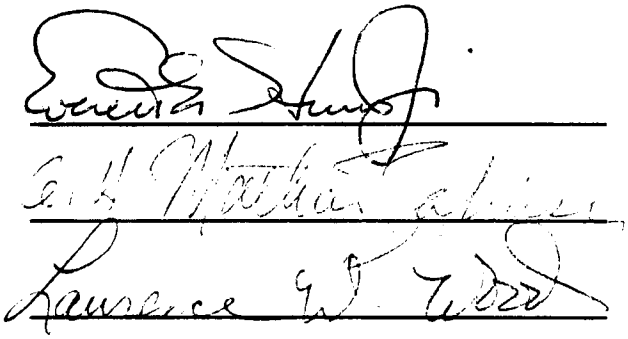

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ABSTRACT

JOHN WESLEY'S DOCTRINE OF PREVENIENT GRACE

IN MISSIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Interpretation of God's redemptive work in all persons is a key missiological concern. Perspectives range between universalist and exclusivist extremes. Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace, incorporated within his larger soteriology, offers a balanced interpretation of God's universal saving activities. It stands on three affirmations: 1) God's universal salvific will; 2) the universal effects of Christ's atonement restoring to persons some awareness of God, sensitivity to their need for God and the option of repentance; and 3) the responsive character of human experience in the presence of God's always previous grace.

The true character of this grace begs clear understanding. As part of universal human experience it must be incorporated into models of interpersonal and contextual relationships. Grace should be a factor in the church's interpretation of social, cultural, and worldview patterns. Yet this seems to remain an area of enervating confusion in mission today.

In contrast stands the energy and momentum of the Methodist revival. This study begins by seeking to clarify Wesley's concept of prevenient grace, often in contrast to misleading contemporary interpretations. Part two surveys early Methodist missions, focusing on the

significance and methodological implications of this doctrine for the success of the revival. Part three moves into contemporary application of prevenient grace within current missiological dialogue, closing with a focus on contextuality issues.

Two broad conclusions emerge: 1) Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace is integrally tied to his doctrines of sin, repentance, saving faith, and a maximal concept of life-transforming salvation. Mission in a Wesleyan mode must accept not only the benefits of grace but also acknowledge its goal, and the consequences of its rejection. 2) God's previous activity in all human existence creates the possibility of infinite variety in free human response. Because God's saving grace flows in continuity with his prevenient grace, understanding existing patterns of response is crucial for effective evangelization. Concepts and structures developed prior to the coming of the explicit gospel cannot be ignored.

Combined these conclusions form a motivational and conceptual base for integrating behavioral and social sciences within the mission of the church.

JOHN WESLEY'S DOCTRINE OF PREVENIENT GRACE IN MISSIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

A Dissertation

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the Faculty of the E. Stanley Jones School

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Preface

In the autumn of 1984 I took a course entitled "Anthropology for Missionary Practice" at Asbury Theological Seminary. The professor, Darrell Whiteman, had just returned from mission work and anthropological research in Melanesia. Most of us students were at varying stages of traditional evangelical theological training. It is not surprising that much of what we discussed that semester was new to us, and often unsettling. It was our first exposure to the complex interface of theology and cultural anthropology. The universal applicability of traditional orthodox, i.e. "Western," theological models was being questioned against an increasing awareness of other cultures and worldviews.

Whiteman forced us to examine the relationship between the explicit gospel story and what was already happening in culture groups, prior to the arrival of the missionary's message. Was it possible that God had been at work in "pagan" peoples in ways that missionaries should take seriously? If so, how does this impact the missionary's approach to witness and ministry?

These were exciting ideas. They seemed new and fertile for creative exploration. But gradually anxiety began to build. The prospect of God's previous work in non-Christian people seemed to compromise the primacy of the explicit gospel message, as well as the validity of the missionary task. If God is already "there," why do missionaries need to go in witness?

It was in this context that my interest in exploring the missiological implications of Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace began. Following a year of teaching at a Bible college in Kenya, I returned for further studies in the E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Evangelism at Asbury Theological Seminary.

The next two years of course work were marked by significant personal struggle as I tried to find balance between my theological foundations and various behavioral science based missiological models. I oscillated between extremes, becoming first cynical about my own Wesleyan theological roots, and later suspicious of what I saw as theological naivete in much contemporary missiology. The doctrine of prevenient grace "haunted" me throughout the whole process. Was there a key to reconciling these tensions in Wesley's famous interpretation of the God's constant redemptive outreach to all people?

It is out of this struggle, and in reflecting on my own cross-cultural ministry experiences, that the focus of this research project emerged. Two primary sets of questions motivated me. First, I was suspicious of some of the seemingly facile missiological applications of the concept of God's grace that is active in all persons before saving faith. What is "prevenient grace" really? It is not a biblical term; is it even a legitimate concept? What did it mean to Wesley? How significant was it to him? How did he apply it? Second, I was curious to see what kind of implications might emerge from a fresh study of prevenient grace undertaken with the backlog of troubling missiological questions running through my mind. What, if anything, does this theological affirmation have to offer the missiological dialogue today?

I began with a positive bias toward the Wesleyan theological orientation, which expressed itself in ways that mirrored my on-going ambivalence. In early stages of my research I hoped the results would "set the record straight"; I visualized a sort of exposé of the missiology currently done in the "Wesleyan" spirit at the E. Stanley Jones School. Later, more optimistically, I hoped that a missiological interpretation of prevenient grace would be the common ground uniting evangelical, ecumenical and Roman Catholic mission perspectives. At one point it looked as though the doctrine of prevenient grace would make a helpful contribution to all the current missiological models which claim to take culture or context seriously.

Now at the end of this project these early expectations appear unfulfilled in their extreme articulation. They have been replaced with modified versions. First, what I found in Wesley implies a strong support, after all, for many of the emphases that distinguish missiology at Asbury. However, this Wesleyan support is contingent upon a crystal clear and committed focus upon the fundamental goals of Wesley's biblical Christianity. It is impossible to abstract the doctrine of prevenient grace in Wesley's thought and practice from its explicit goal-orientation. Prevenient grace cannot be properly understood apart from Wesley's concepts of the life-transforming gift of saving faith, and the subsequent re-creation of fallen humanity in perfect love. Any missiology that would claim to be Wesleyan must affirm not only Wesley's concepts of God's grace as the means of salvation, but also his very specific view of its ultimate ends.

A second modification concerns the rather exclusive implications

of Wesley's theological holism. The doctrine of prevenient grace proved to be inextricably woven into Wesley's larger theology. Only at a superficial, and misleading level does it harmonize with missiological models which do not share its fundamental perspectives on sin, faith and salvation. Yet, paradoxically, Wesley's framework seems remarkably able to make full use of contributions from the various behavioral and contextual sciences. In considering this openness, however, it is essential to realize that the creative use of resources from outside Wesley's theological matrix depends upon their application to the very specific transformational goals implicit in his fundamental doctrines of sin, faith, and salvation. In other words, the place of the behavioral and contextual sciences in a Wesleyan missiology is auxilliary. The primary Wesleyan agenda arises rather authoritatively from Wesley's vigorous combination of orthodox and pietistic biblical theology. The means may vary, but the goals remain constant.

Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace engages a powerful combination of emphases for contemporary missiology. In its goal orientation it implies 1) a passionate focus on the absolute primacy of divine-human reconciliation, and 2) the radical transformation of the Christian's whole life in real earthly human history. Looked at in terms of its immediate effect on all persons, at all times, it forces anyone who claims to be working in harmony with God's universal redeeming will to acknowledge human contextuality and group dynamics. If God's grace is active in all persons, trying to lead them to repentance and salvation, then every human context must be taken seriously as it reflects responses to this process in action.

Practically, Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace suggests two pieces of primary necessary "equipment" for missionaries: 1) their own unmistakable, transforming and ongoing personal contact with Christ -- their own experiential awareness and vision of what prevenient grace is designed to accomplish in human lives; and 2) a maximum competency in the observational and analytical tools for interpreting universally grace-infused human existence in its variety of contexts.

From one perspective, these conclusions may seem to be "old news," or self-evident. However, the uniqueness of this study may not be in its results, so much as in its process. After working through doctrinal and historical material, I now feel more confident in the application of Wesley's theology to mission, and at peace with the way it helps incorporate the contributions of other disciplines. I also anticipate on-going fruit from further reflections on the material drawn from Wesley's own works and from the way they expressed themselves in practice.

The struggle has been rewarding. I hope the ground I have covered here will contribute to a growing literature of missiological exploration from a Wesleyan perspective coming out of the E. Stanley Jones School. The dialogue between missiology and Wesley studies seems to be a rich interdisciplinary interface, with potential for fresh discoveries on both sides.

From start to finish I owe this project to the joint input and encouragement of <u>both</u> the missions and theological faculties of Asbury Theological Seminary. Their patience, prayers, personal availability, and constant encouragement largely account for its completion.

INTRODUCTION

John Wesley believed that prevenient grace is the gift of God, given to all human beings on the basis of Christ's atonement. It comes to all people before they experience saving faith, and is prerequisite to it. Prevenient grace enables persons to be aware of and to seek after God; to know their need and to respond positively to the overtures of the Holy Spirit (Lindström 1980:44ff).

The object of this study is to examine Wesley's concept of prevenient grace in light of contemporary missiological concerns. Its particular focus is the relationship between the implicit work of God in all persons, in all contexts, and the explicit communication of the gospel message. The primary question asks, how does what God has already done relate to what he has yet to do in fulfilling his redemptive purposes for his creation? More specifically, how does a confidence in, and a clear understanding of, God's eternally previous work in all persons inform mission theology and practice?

From the start, this enquiry raises methodological and hermeneutical questions. Missiology, with one foot in academic theology and the other in the social and behavioral sciences, spends much energy struggling to find balance. A moment's reflection reveals the ease with which each of its disciplinary partners could assert authority and overpower the other. Even when it is agreed that the two must function in harmony, the initial question is still, "who goes first?" Does

human experience as it is, or human experience as it is meant to be lay the ground rules?

Once one has raised the question of what God has yet to do, there is an implicit criticism of what already is. At best it suggests incompleteness. More strongly, it might imply a need for significant change. Both of these imply a standard external to human experience as it is, and this is a point of tension. What or who determines the standard of completeness or rightness? Which discipline(s) is best equipped to probe these issues?

Traditionally, it was the concern of theology to define the categories of human needs and God's provision for those needs. It was theologians who interpreted Scripture and gave the church its vision of God's plan -- those changes in human experience which would bring it into conformity with God's intentions. However, recent trends in both theology and missiology have questioned this division of labor. Theologians have been accused of an "arm-chair" approach which focuses upon insignificant questions and provides answers inadequate for the real needs of today (Schreiter 1985:2-4). Heavenly visions have paled in response to the anguish of earthly human need, and the suspicion of religion as an "opiate" in the service of oppressive world powers has taken root in many minds.

Other perspectives and disciplines now claim the right to interpret human experience, and in so doing there has been a shift in the traditional role of theology in defining the missionary agenda. Current human experience informs not only the application of theology for many missiologists, but the hermeneutics of theology as well.

This is the transition which Karl Barth visualized and so violently rejected in his debate with Emil Brunner over "natural theology" (Brunner 1946). His experience with the "contextualization" of Christianity into the culture of Hitler's Third Reich sensitized him to any dialogue between "natural" humanity and the Gospel. From his perspective, nothing one might discover about human existence by observing it, as it is, could or should be of any consequence to the preaching of the word of God. The radical discontinuity between persons as they are by "nature," and as they ought to be by "grace," eliminates any "point of contact." There is only proclamation. Others have followed Barth in a similar line of reasoning up to the present, continuing his negative appraisal of a productive marriage of theology with the various disciplines which study human experience descriptively vs. prescriptively (Kraemer 1938; C. F. H. Henry 1980; Gross 1985).

Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace, as it functions within his larger theological structure, offers a balance where other models seem prone toward dichotomistic reasoning. Ironically, Wesley builds on a nearly literal reading of Scripture to provide a theological basis for understanding, appreciating, and effectively using what God has done already in all people as the basis for all further ministry. Without compromising his perspective on the depth of human need and inadequacy, as defined by Scripture, he takes seriously the validity of human experience in its present form. Twisted though it may be by sin, he does not demand that it be rejected or ignored. This is due to his unique concept of God's universal, previous work in all human history. By affirming God's presence in every human setting, Wesley

builds a foundation for the activation of all disciplines which are able to shed light on the complexity of human experience within the variety of contexts in which persons find meaning and identity.

This is perhaps the most significant contribution that a clear understanding of the doctrine of prevenient grace can make to contemporary missiological concerns. The transition to an increasing emphasis upon the social and behavioral sciences has created problems of its own, comparable in intensity to those attributed to an unbalanced emphasis on "ivory tower" theologizing. It may be that in the doctrine of prevenient grace there is potential for a new synthesis of the perennial tension between long-standing polarities. In theology these poles correspond to the categories of "nature" and "grace" (Rogers 1967:iii). In missiology one might speak of the "split between Gospel and culture" (Shorter 1988:215), or the distinction between two "horizons" -- the "world" and the gospel (Küng 1988:165ff). If such a synthesis can be achieved, it may contribute to a bridging of some of the gaps which handicap the mission of the church (Arbuckle 1983:171ff). This is an energizing prospect. Roman Catholic anthropologist, Aylward Shorter (1988:215) believes the attempt to resolve these issues is "without a doubt the drama of our time."

The purpose of this study is to bring a significant aspect of Wesley's "practical theology" (Baker 1987) into missiological dialogue. At this point it may be helpful to consider in more detail the character of the dialogue to which Wesley's theology is being called to contribute.

A complex array of social and behavioral sciences exists for analyzing human experience. Their commitment to value-free observa-

tion enables significant creative freedom in interpretation. This has motivated several generations of exploration into areas of human experience that would have been, in the last century, largely dismissed as "uncivilized," inferior or insignificant.

In the last few decades these disciplines which focus on understanding human beings as they are have multiplied, growing in number, specialized sophistication and popularity. They have also provided a wealth of data which challenge the status of Western culture, society, and worldview. Those older disciplines which address the question of what human beings ought to be have seen a corresponding decline, much lamented by those in more of the classicist tradition (Bloom 1987). Theology has been most often associated with those older disciplines which, in their isolated, idealistic speculation, have lost whatever touch they ever had with the "real" issues of the day.

Both these transitions have been welcomed and encouraged in missiology. Many missiologists consider them long-awaited corrections to an unfortunate imbalance. Charles Taber wrote in 1978:

> What is needed now is for Africans and Asians to start fresh, beginning with the direct interaction of their cultures with the Scriptures rather than tagging along at the tail end of the long history of Western embroidery, and to restate the Christian faith in answer to African/Asian questions with Asian/African methodologies and terminologies. (1978b:10)

Ten years later, Samuel Rayan (1988:129) expressed similar convictions:

> We believe that our greatest gain is the articulation of our methodology. We refuse the classical way of starting from Church teaching or Bible, deducing theological conclusions and applying them to historical reality. We start rather from concrete social reality and a preferential option for the down-trodden and commitment to their liberation.

Amid the gradually growing post-colonial sensitivity to non-Western cultures, societies and worldviews, and the recognition of the suffering that Western ways have inflicted upon them, traditional Western theology has been asked to take a backseat to those sciences which address the "concrete social reality." This often involves a stinging indictment of Western theology for its part in the oppression and destruction of non-Western peoples and cultures. Out of this indictment comes a call for a new way of doing theology which takes contextual considerations more seriously. "There is now a realization that all theologies have contexts, interests, relationships of power, special concerns -- and to pretend that this is not the case is to be blind" (Schreiter 1985:4).

In its attempts to balance theology with the behavioral and social sciences, missiologists try not to perpetuate this "blindness." Perhaps the most important factor in this attempt is to realize that whatever a person believes to be objectively "true" is in fact highly conditioned by one's "context." Max Stackhouse (1988:7) writes in praise of missiologists, Charles Kraft (1979) and Robert Schreiter (1985):

> We must learn to listen to contexts discerningly and learn how to recognize the contextuality of most of what we humans say even when we think we are contextualizing the "eternal truths" of the Gospel. [Kraft's and Schreiter's] efforts are fully in accord with the theological doctrine of sin, which, among other things, reminds us of the pretense involved if we think we can "have" the pure truth of God or that we can "do" the justice of God without ambiguity.

This point, so widely affirmed, is well taken. Yet it raises a set of very complex questions. To be sensitive to contextual influences requires some concept of contextuality, but what makes up a particular "context" is nearly impossible to define conclusively. The term repre-

sents all those factors and forces which in some way influence human experience. These include cognitive and linguistic patterns within the mind of the person, the pressures of kinship obligations and social expectations, and the impact of dynamics as divergent as folklore, mythology, memories, religion, history, politics and economics.

The intricacy of contextuality has spawned a wide variety of analytical approaches to aid understanding. Each component of human contextuality has a related discipline designed to explore it, from cognitive, cultural, and physical anthropologies, to psychology, sociology, comparative religion and economics. In their collective designation these are often referred to as behavioral or social sciences. (From here on in this study they will be referred to generally as "contextual sciences.") Regardless of their designation, these are the tools which missiologists hope to integrate with the gospel in order to communicate it more effectively to others (Kraft 1977). Stackhouse (1988:12) explains: "The reason these tools of analysis have been developed is that contexts do not define themselves. A socio-historical hermeneutic is required . . . ."

Yet, the integration of the many contextual sciences with the gospel is not an easy thing to accomplish. In attempting to avoid blindness to context, some missiologists are beginning to be aware of another blindness peculiar to their own field. It concerns the essential relativity of the contextual sciences, and its incompatibility with the mission of the church, which most believe goes beyond observation and analysis. In dialogue with Charles Taber, J. Andrew Kirk (1978:26) describes some of the tension between recognizing, on the one hand,

the relativity of all cultures, and the standards of the kingdom of God, on the other.

> Though there is not one normatively valid culture, there are cultural values and conventions which more or less approximate the values of the Kingdom. If this were not so, it would be vain to seek for changes and would deny the social and cultural implications of the Gospel. . . . We should not exchange the absolutist pretensions of western cultures for the total autonomy of non-western ones.

Kirk is expressing the dilemma mentioned above -- the question of standards. Unless one is prepared simply to affirm that all human conditions are exactly as they should be, norms are unavoidable. They are not, however, easily defined.

Most missiologists affirm that the norms or standards for all cultures come from "outside" any particular culture, and should judge all cultures equally. Norms belong to the realm of revelation. Yet, before any truth can become meaningful to persons it must be translated into human terms. "God has always communicated his marvels using the language and experience of people" (John Paul II 1983:xii), and "Christian faith cannot exist except in cultural form" (Shorter 1988:12). The proper understanding of God's communications to humanity, therefore, must involve the tools of contextual interpretation. Biblical scholars are called to become sociologists, anthropologists, linguists, political scientists and economists in order to accurately decipher the true meaning of God's messages as they have come down to the present in Scripture.

While ideally, all biblical scholarship and theology is informed by these disciplines, the fact that they are so numerous and often at odds with each other raises serious additional problems. For example, an

anthropological reading of Scripture may differ radically from a psychological or political reading. Few interpreters can claim expertise and objective balance in their use of all the contextual sciences. And experience does not lead to optimism about the collective balance of a community of scholars. In the process of "normal science" the tendency is to choose sides and to specialize within a focused set of questions and concerns which define a scholarly community. Such communities are notoriously exclusive and tend to defend their existence in terms of other such communities' faulty methodology, errors and blind spots. Historically, the definition of specific fields, has led to isolation more than cross-fertilization (Kuhn 1970).

Usually one particular perspective claims dominance as the most relevant or appropriate hermeneutic for a particular context at one particular time (Schreiter 1985:16). For example, contemporary liberation theologies favor interpretations drawn on the basis of a political and economic perspective. This done, it is economic (vs. cultural, linguistic, ethnic, or racial) categories that define first the context and then the sort of theology that should be done in that context. The boundaries of collective human experience are outlined in terms of "poverty" such that all persons below a certain yearly income or standard of living are considered a "context." Reflection upon the experience of persons within this context results in theological categories radically different from those starting from other perspectives. For example, Leonardo Boff (1988:12) explains: "The viewpoint of the poor allows us to recover the image of God as God of life, Jesus as liberator, of the Spirit as principle of freedom, and church as people of God, and

so on."

The multiplicity of contextual science models vying for missiological application creates a problem. While one may affirm the need for "the social sciences [to] play the principle role" in contextually-sensitve missiology (Schreiter 1985:xii), one must ask, which social science? Stackhouse (1988:12) recognizes this tension and affirms that "one of the most perplexing issues of our day is the question of which tools of social and historical analysis both reveal the deepest meanings of a context and open it to the possibility of contextualizing the faith." The answer depends upon which context one is addressing. But this only pushes the question back one step; it gives no definitive answer. Given the variety of interwoven contextual dynamics which could justifiably define any given human setting, how does one choose which context to address?

Breaking this question down into its components, Stackhouse (1988:10) asks simply, "How big is a context?" Recognizing the extremely dynamic character of human experience, he then wonders: "How long does [a context] last?" He points out that membership in a context is also a fluid and dynamic concern: "Who is in it and who is out of it?" For example, when does a person cease to be poor or rich; when does an immigrant become a true citizen; when does a person cease to be rural and become fully urban; when does a Kikuyu become a Kenyan? Finally, the ubiquitous question of method: "How do we know?" His further considerations deserve quotation in his own words (1988:11):

> We are forced to ask what it is that defines the boundaries of a context: regionality, nationality, cultural-linguistic history, ethnicity, political system, economic class, gender

> identity, social status, or what? Contemporary social theorists and social ethicists have developed a number of terms to attempt to identify the decisive meanings of "context." Phenomenological thinkers, such as Gibson Winter, have attempted to speak of context in terms of the "life-world" in which people find their identity. Contextual ethicists, such as Paul Lehman, speak often of the koinonia, or "community." Anthropologists speak of "cultures"; sociologists of "societies" or "social systems"; and those doing comparative studies speak of "civilizations." The problem is that each of these definitions entails a different way of understanding the decisive contours of human contexts, of what the "here" is to which contextual thinking wants to draw our attention.

Amid the disciplines mentioned by Stackhouse, anthropology and the various cultural models seem to dominate missiology at present, in some areas. However, even among these the same troublesome dynamics of variety and relativity apply. Just as one does theology from a variety of perspectives, so one can approach anthropology and culture from many different orientations. Lucien Richard (1988:58) explains:

> [C]ulture is understood in a variety of ways, which affect the nature of its limiting and constraining functions. Different approaches to anthropology, sociology, and history lead to different understandings of culture.
>
> As in every other organized field of knowledge anthropology, sociology, and history have their own metaphors, models, and paradigms.

The energy invested by contemporary writers to sharpen and clarify a definition of "culture" illustrates the variety of viable, yet highly controversial perspectives on legitimate boundaries of cultural contexts (Geertz 1973:3-83; Azevedo 1982:8-11; Schreiter 1985:38-74; Luzbetak 1988:133-222; Shorter 1988:31-39). Largely the debate is practical: Which definition works best to give answers to the present questions being asked? This concern for definition is nowhere more visible than at the interface of the contextual sciences and theology, and it accounts for the succession of new terms and categories in the

quest for compatibility. It is an on-going search. In spite of commitment to various models and perspectives, few missiologists would suggest that the definitive word has been said. Shorter (1988:4) explains:

> The Human Sciences are young and their vocabulary is still somewhat fluid. When this vocabulary is used by theologians there is still further room for misunderstanding. In offering the reader some initial definitions there is no intention of artificially halting the development of sociological or theological language, of "freezing" the terminology, as it were. . . . The purpose is simply to establish meanings and to ensure that we know what we are talking about.

Shorter's goal seems legitimate. Often there is a profound, and sometimes unconscious, unawareness of "what we are talking about" when theology and the contextual sciences try to dialogue. The purpose of this discussion so far is not to undermine contextual sensitivity or to denigrate the efforts made by the contextual sciences to provide tools to better understand human experience. It is rather to address the fact that it is not enough to affirm the importance of "context" or "culture" or any other designation of collective human entities. More precision is required, if one is not to get lost in a fog of familiar, but vaguely-defined terminology.

One of the first steps toward precision is to recognize the implications of relativism in the contextual sciences -- the paradoxically high value placed on a value-free methodology. Within the "rules" of the contextual sciences there can be no definitive answers as to what human beings "ought" to be or do, or how one "ought" to approach the study of context. There is only an on-going search which in itself cannot be justified by its own standards. For example, one may vigorously study human behavior, but the question of <u>why</u> one is doing so

cannot be answered without an appeal to some standard of values. Aside from some value-set one can easily say that the reason one studies, say, cultural anthropology is because one has been conditioned by one's culture to do so. This quickly dissolves into the kind of humorous absurdity quoted by Rene Padilla (1978:31) as he tried to make a similar point in response to Charles Taber's 1978 essay, "Is There More Than One Way to Do Theology?":

> Could it not be, in fact, that Taber's approach in his paper is all too dependent on a culture in which relativism has become an absolute? I am reminded of an amusing story of an Oxford undergraduate who, after hearing Archbishop William Temple speak, argued, "Well, of course, Archbishop, the point is that you believe what you believe because of the way you were brought up." To which the Archbishop coolly replied, "That is as it may be. But the fact remains that you believe that I believe what I believe because of the way I was brought up, because of the way you were brought up."

Padilla and Stackhouse are joined by a handful of other missiologists who are responding to the problem of relativism, including Alfred Krass (1979) and Donald Larson (1978). However, it is easier to raise the issue than it is to offer an alternative. Contextual sensitivity in mission is not optional: The sad consequences of a poorly contextualized presentation of the gospel are too well-documented to be dismissed (Kraft 1979; Nida 1954). But the question remains as to what proper contextualization involves; or, in the terminology of the opening question, what a proper relationship between what <u>is</u> and what <u>ought to be</u> would look like.

If we start with the premises of the contextual sciences alone, "we cannot speak of 'contextualizing the faith', for there would be no 'faith' distinct from what is already in context to contextualize. We

could only speak of 'expressing' the various faiths of various contexts" (Stackhouse 1988:8). Yet, if we propose to start with the "pure" gospel, how can we tell if this is not just a creation of Western culture distorting what was already heavily conditioned by its birth in an ancient Near Eastern context? And, if we try to apply the contextual sciences to our biblical and theological hermeneutics, how do we know that we haven't been similarly biased by our contextually-conditioned reading of contexts? "History and experience in their own facticity remain ambiguous" (Richard 1988:68). If my conclusions differ from your conclusions, who can tell which of us is correct? Is it even legitimate to ask that question?

Donald Larson (1978:27) raised these questions over ten years ago in response to the first issue of the now discontinued journal Gospel in Context:

> Gospel in Context suggests that there are "gospels" that are "not in context." But there is nothing that is not in context!
>
> But wait, what is really meant by Gospel in Context is perhaps "the Gospel in a context that is different from my own, " or "the Gospel in a new context," or "one man's Gospel in another man's context"; that is, my Gospel in your context," or "your Gospel in his context," etc.
>
> But what are we saying? That everyone makes his own gospel? . . . [This] thesis is sound: there are as many ways to do theology as there are people doing it.

It is important to realize from the start the character of the dialogue into which the following study proposes to bring Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace. From one perspective the probability of energizing clarity emerging from such a mixed bag looks rather slim. Yet it is the ambiguity, contradictions, and paradoxical skepticism about the possibility of some normative truth emerging from ostensibly "objec-

tive" observation in the contextual sciences that forms part of the motivation for further inquiry. Clearly the task is not finished, nor the available answers satisfactory. In response, this study is based on the confidence that a clear concept of prevenient grace has something unique to offer missiologists who want to take human contextuality seriously, 1) without losing their theological moorings, and 2) without dissolving the whole endeavor into infinite subjectivity.

It was by taking Scripture and theology as seriously as he did, that Wesley arrived at a perspective which raises an appreciation of human contextuality to a unique and remarkably high level of significance. When prevenient grace is understood in light of Wesley's larger theology, it offers a clear definition of goals, values, and standards; but it does so in such a way that the contextual sciences are not rejected. In fact, within a missiological perspective informed by a clear understanding of prevenient grace, the contextual sciences become more important than ever. They find in it an energizing motive force which they cannot provide for themselves with value-free methodological authenticity.

There is nothing new about the desire or goal for dynamic synergy between theology and the contextual sciences. In fact, it has motivated a significant body of research and literature, so much so that the development of such integrative models warrants historical study in

itself.[1] However, among these, a distinctly Wesleyan perspective, using the doctrine of prevenient grace, has not yet appeared. In 1967 Charles Rogers submitted an exhaustive doctoral dissertation on Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace, yet he intentionally avoided questions of application. In the introduction he said: "Questions concerning the contemporary relevance of Wesley's views are here tabled in the interest of seeking clarity on Wesley himself" (1967:x). In 1976, missionary anthropologist, Alan R. Tippett wrote an essay, "The Metaanthropology of Conversion in Non-Western Society," in which he developed some of the potential of the doctrine of prevenient grace for missiological application. This was not, however, the primary focus of his work, which unfortunately has not yet been published.

The lack of explicit attention given to Wesley in missiological

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1. Among the most helpful offerings are: Robert Schreiter's Constructing Local Theologies (1985:1-21), which opens with a valuable critical analysis of conceptual and terminological development in missiology. More recently, Louis Luzbetak's new edition of The Church and Cultures (1988:64-105) contains a similar detailed historical treatment of "various "Mission Models" in chapter three. Max Stackhouse's introductory essay "Contextualization, Contextuality, and Contextualism" (1988) offers another more pointedly critical overview. The first chapter of Aylward Shorter's Toward a Theology of Inculturation (1988:3-16), entitled "Understanding the Terms" focuses on the subtle semantic variations which have played an important role in the development of models of gospel and context. Beauchamp's essay in Bible and Inculturation (1983:2-6) provides a theological perspective on the relationship between the inculturation model and the doctrine of the incarnation.

From an evangelical perspective, Bruce Nicholl's Contextualization: A Theology of Gospel and Culture (1979:20-36) provides a helpful overview of the progress of the contextual dialogue in chapter two. Taber's essay in The Gospel and Islam (1978a:143-154) addresses the need for transition from indigenization to contextualization concepts and models. Other noteworthy summarizing essays include those listed in the bibliography by Gerald Arbuckle (1983), Krikor Haleblian (1983), Justin Ukpong (1987), and Ruy Costa (1988). Finally Albert Krass's essay in the penultimate issue of Gospel in Context (1979) addresses the need for a new model of context defined by the values of the kingdom of God.

studies is difficult to understand, given the character of his ministry and its world-wide impact. Martin Schmidt's The Young Wesley: Missionary and Theologian of Missions (1958) is tantalizingly titled, but focuses exclusively on Wesley before his experience of saving faith, and before the formulation of his most distinctive theological perspectives. Theodore Doraisamy, a Methodist bishop from Singapore has published a historical study of missionary motivation in the Methodist tradition, but with a limiting perspective on its significance for the East (1983). Philip Capp's unpublished master's thesis dealt with "Wesley's understanding of the nature of Methodism with reference to the Christian world mission" (1958). Capp's insights are helpful, but the scope of his project is limited by its very nature, and his findings are not widely available. In the area of church growth theory, George C. Hunter III has published a book entitled, To Spread the Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit (1987). Also, Everett N. Hunt, Jr. (1983) has contributed an essay, "The Divine Mandate" in A Contemporary Wesleyan Theology, which looks at the place of the Wesleyan revival in mission history. None of these studies, however, treat the doctrine of prevenient grace explicitly, although they generally acknowledge its profound significance for early Methodism.

Interestingly, it is in recent Roman Catholic missiology that language resembling Wesley's appears most frequently. Robert Schreiter (1985:20-21) talks about the influence of Jesus Christ extending beyond the "proclamations of the Scriptures" to include "the Word which missionaries find already active in the culture upon their arrival." This emphasis in Roman Catholic theology is relatively new,

stemming from Vatican II. Aylward Shorter explains (1988:15): "One of the most valuable insights of the Second Vatican Council was that God's all-encompassing grace and activity is not limited by the visible institutions of the Church."[1] However, in spite of some similarities with these Roman Catholic affirmations at the descriptive level, we will explore later the significant distinctions in Wesley's larger theology which inform his understanding of how God is at work in all people prior to the experience of faith.

Although the background for this inquiry is the recent search for adequate missiological models, it is not the intention of this study to engage in a comparative analysis of Wesley's perspective against any of the many models currently in practice and debate. Nor does this study intend to show that Wesley was "actually" a proto-liberationist, or an early Lausanne evangelical, or to give his stamp of approval to any other contemporary type. There is likewise no motivation to denigrate any particular perspective for its lack of congruence with Wesley.

On the contrary, one primary hypothesis motivating this study is that a genuinely Wesleyan understanding of the relationship between the gospel and persons in context has yet to be developed. A second, hypothesis is that much in the contextual sciences, in spite of their limitations, can be readily incorporated within a model based on prevenient grace. In fact, many existing concepts of human contextuality may prove indispensable to the full practical application of Wesley's theology

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1. James A. Scherer gives a clear analysis of these transitions in his book, Gospel, Church, and Kingdom (1987:195-205).

of ministry in the great variety of contemporary human contexts. If this is case, it could be that in the appropriate activation of these resources, of which Wesley was only intuitively aware, there is potential for even more effective evangelization than he ever experienced or visualized.

Of course, the proposed uniqueness of the Wesleyan perspective, and speculations about its integrative capacities cannot claim validity or authority by themselves. Nor do they need to do so at this point. The purpose of this study is not to propose the most "successful" or "proper" or even the most "biblical" approach to gospel and context, although Wesley's theology was fundamentally biblical in character. Rather, the primary goal is to first represent Wesley's thought as accurately and thoroughly as possible, and on this basis to propose some applications which may prove useful in one form or another.

For those who share Wesley's foundational theological affirmations, a "Wesleyan" perspective on gospel and context will need only to demonstrate internal consistency to be persuasive. Those who start with alternative theological axioms may prove more difficult to attract or convince. For some it may be tempting to pick and choose among a selection of particular implications within Wesley's thought and practice. This has been done often in the case of the "world parish" idea, and in the contemporary pluralistic interpretations of the "catholic spirit" (Walls 1986:51ff). However, choosing this or that concept at the surface level of Wesleyan analysis is problematic. The "tightness" of Wesley's "practical" theology makes it difficult to be casually selective and still retain anything more than semantic or formal similarity with what

Wesley intended.

Even so, this holism has not prevented most of Wesley's fundamental theology from undergoing significant alteration in the last two hundred years (Chiles 1965). In fact, theological flexibility has become one of the hallmarks of contemporary Methodism (Walls 1986). This may account for the fact that many of the uniquely Wesleyan theological priorities have been so altered as to no longer exist. In some cases the effect of the alterations has been to contradict substantially the original. As we will see in more detail later, such a radical alteration of Wesley's understanding of saving faith took place within twenty years of his death. It is not surprising that corresponding alterations rippled through the rest of Wesley's theology of ministry with this change in such a key doctrine.

While some degree of alteration and flexibility may seem advisable for Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace and its implications for missions, it should be done with caution. Before any authentic "Wesleyan" interaction -- application and/or alteration -- can take place, it is important to have a clear picture of what Wesley's idea of prevenient grace was in its original form and expressions. It is equally important to appreciate the manner in which the particular doctrine is very tightly interwoven with Wesley's more fundamental concepts of sin, the atonement, saving faith and the potential for "perfection in love" and full salvation for persons here and now. No alteration can be a simple matter of selective adjustment.

Although Wesley was a dedicated pragmatist, nothing he said or did escaped his own rigorous theological reflection. In this Wesley sets

a standard for consistency within his own working priorities and normative concepts. These are certainly debatable, especially in light of new anthropological and psychological data, recent biblical scholarship, and refined hermeneutical methods. However, anything that bears the description "Wesleyan" cannot avoid coming to terms with his fundamental theological starting points.

Having affirmed Wesley's holism, it is important to acknowledge that this presents a very real challenge to a study of his doctrine of prevenient grace as a thing in itself. This doctrine was the logical conclusion to a complex combination of biblical, doctrinal, historical, and experiential affirmations. Its composite character makes it extremely difficult to maintain a specific focus without being drawn into a study of Wesley's whole theology.

The same tension applies to other less specifically "theological" concepts as well, as in the case of contextuality. The goal of this study is to look at how the doctrine of prevenient grace informs an understanding of the relationship between the gospel and persons in human contexts. However, it is impossible to speak of a Wesleyan view of <u>context</u> apart from Wesley's understanding of the <u>gospel</u>. For Wesley the most relevant contexts of human experience were primarily theologically defined. Though he affirmed that he found nothing in authentic human experience that contradicted his biblical theology, the scriptures remained normative; human experience was always interpreted in terms of a plain reading of Scripture. Similarly, Wesley's understanding of the gospel is dependent on his view of the human need for salvation and the character of God's specific provision for it.

Clearly, one is quickly and unavoidably drawn far beyond the limits of prevenient grace alone. It is a concept based on strong theological assumptions which point to very specific theological and experiential goals. These will necessarily be covered to a limited degree in order to avoid any misconceptions, however, the concern for thoroughness and holism must be balanced with the need for focus.

Prospectus

In following Wesley's path one must start where he starts. This accounts for the foundational material found in part one. Here the goal is to develop a working definition of prevenient grace to take into the rest of the study.

In addition to starting with conceptual theological clarity it is also crucial to see how doctrine informed practice in Wesley's life and in the lives of his immediate followers. This will be the focus of part two as we look at early Methodist mission efforts in light of the impact of prevenient grace in their doctrinal base.

In part three the material from chapters one and two will be supplemented by 1) selections from Wesley's writings which specifically address his understanding of human contextuality and sociality, and 2) accounts of how these views influenced his pattern of ministry. This will involve a more detailed study in the relationship between prevenient grace and the uniqueness of Wesley's concepts of sin, repentance, saving faith, and salvation.

Bracketing any reservations about Wesley's theological starting points, we will try to follow the implications of prevenient grace along

the trajectory in which they were launched to see what this concept may have to offer today. For clarity, it may at times prove helpful to contrast Wesley's perspective with others being currently offered. The primary focus, however, will be upon the way in which Wesley's concept of prevenient grace informed his understanding of the challenge of bringing the gospel to people in a wide variety of social, cultural, racial and economic contexts.

In conclusion we will consider the implications of Wesley's approach to contextually sensitive ministry for the multiple social configurations of today's "world parish." One particular concern will be to explore the possible integration of the resources of various behavioral and social science models within a missiological model based on Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace. Our interest will be first to see how these resources can be used to sharpen the universal redemptive message of on-going, transforming, saving faith in Jesus Christ; second, how they can inform the development of dynamic collective expressions of the kingdom of God within any existing context; and third, how these collective Christian sub-contexts can be configured both to sustain their Christ-centered spirituality, and simultaneously remain actively engaged within their larger, grace-resisting world.

PART I

WESLEY'S CONCEPT OF PREVENIENT GRACE: TOWARD A WORKING DEFINITION

CHAPTER 1

PREVENIENT GRACE IN WESLEY'S PRIMARY WRITINGS

Introduction

Purpose

The goal of part one is to formulate an accurate and applicable understanding of the doctrine of prevenient grace in John Wesley's theology. This is not a simple task. The apparent ambiguity of what prevenient grace meant in the eighteenth century Methodist revival, and what it could mean today, attracts many interpretations. Not surprisingly some of these differ from each other. Some seem to contradict Wesley.[1] The purpose of this inquiry, however, is not so much to try to set the record straight. Its goal is to identify, consolidate and synthesize the multiple perspectives into a solid working definition that can both evaluate and stimulate creative applications to practical ministry.

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1. An insightful critique of some of the ways in which modern Methodists have "stretched" Wesley's original interpretation of prevenient grace is found in Donal Dorr's article, "Total Corruption and the Wesleyan Tradition" (1964:309-310).

Steve Harper (1983:39) expresses his concern that many in the Wesleyan tradition do not even know what prevenient grace is.

The dual priorities of accuracy and applicability characterize much recent Wesleyan scholarship (Wynkoop 1975; Maddox 1984; Ariarajah, Fowler, Outler, Tamez, 1985). This indicates a shift from earlier agendas which focused primarily upon historical and theological precision, often intentionally excluding practical concerns.[1] By now it is assumed that a high degree of clarity has already been achieved and is available in the literature. The remaining task is to synthesize and evaluate "in order to enable an application of Wesley's relevance to the issues in our times and our futures" (Outler 1985:41).

In this task objectivity is often illusive. Wesleyans tend to value their roots. Because the desire to see connections and similarities with Wesley can skew one's perspective, the contemporary sensitivity to hermeneutical integrity seems quite relevant to this study. Out of concern for Wesleyan scholarship, Mildred Bangs Wynkoop warns that "almost any system of theology can be derived from Wesley. . . built on a selection of passages from his works congenial to the basic philosophical assumptions of the author" (1971:13). Her caution need not be limited only to "systems of theology."[2]

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1. Albert Outler (1985:34) suggested that this shift in priorities constitutes a third "stage" in the history of Wesley studies. Charles A. Rogers' dissertation is an excellent example of work done in the mode of Outler's second stage. In 1967 he prefaced his exhaustive treatment of prevenient grace with the disclaimer that "questions concerning the contemporary relevance of Wesley's view are here tabled in the interest of seeking clarity on Wesley himself" (1967:x).

2. Wynkoop's concern parallels the thesis of Thomas Kuhn's Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1970:23-34), that the questions we ask and the answers we expect impact the conclusions we reach. Inevitably the questions that clarify one mystery will neglect and obscure others. It is difficult to maintain balanced holism with detailed analysis.

Methodology

These potential pitfalls indicate a warning to proceed with caution. A wide sampling of interpretations is perhaps the best hedge against self-serving subjectivity. That sampling should also represent a significant sweep in the history of Wesleyan interpretation, as well as a variety of perspectives. Fortunately the historical and interpretive literature is extensive. Although most of the scholars writing about Wesley come from within the Methodist tradition, the diversity among those claiming Wesleyan ancestry is sufficient to create breadth. In addition, at least one Roman Catholic has addressed prevenient grace specifically as a point of potential ecumenical dialogue (Dorr 1964).

To balance the breadth of a diverse interpretive sampling, ideally there should be an in-depth treatment of the primary Wesleyan sources. That is, however, beyond the scope of this particular study. It might also be redundant in light of Charles Rogers' detailed research.[1] Similarly, a thorough overview of Wesley's theological antecendents would be desirable. Clearly, his concept of prevenient grace did not emerge in a vacuum. Yet, again, it is beyond the scope of this study to make a new, detailed investigation of Wesley's rich theological heritage in the Anglo-Catholic and Puritan traditions. The work of several contemporary scholars in this area must suffice for a fresh inquiry into the fundamental inherited categories which controlled Wesley's thought and

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1. Charles A. Rogers' dissertation (1967) has done a thorough job of surveying the development of Wesley's concept of prevenient grace. He draws from a wide sampling of standard Wesley texts, as well as obscure, upublished material from private collections. Unfortunately, this work has not been published and is not widely available.

ministry.[1]

Accepting these limitations, this study will make use of a careful selection from the secondary interpretive material provided by Wesley's commentators, critics and champions. However, Wesley's own words cannot be completely ignored. Certain key texts within his standard published writings have been selected, and will be allowed to speak for themselves in chapter one before we turn to the secondary interpretive material. These representative citations will be important anchor points when considering later interpretations.

Turning to Wesley's commentators, chapter two will focus particularly on the writings of John Fletcher, because of 1) his close personal friendship with Wesley, 2) his own integral part in the Wesleyan revival 3) the clarity and strength of his writing, and 4) the fact that John Wesley himself edited (without substantial changes) all of Fletcher's most important work in defense of Methodist doctrine (Coppedge 1987:215ff). The uniqueness of Fletcher's relationship with Wesley and the fact that he left such a large collection of material explaining and defending Wesleyan doctrine seems to warrant more extensive attention than might seem proportional otherwise.

After this look at Fletcher's perspectives, chapter three will turn to a selection of more contemporary Wesley interpreters. At times these secondary sources will take us back into Wesley's writings for illustration, confirmation, and critique. They will also take us into some bio-

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1. See Monk (1966); A. Wood (1967:19-28); Baker (1962); Orcibal (1965) and Rogers (1967:25-58).

graphical concerns. Although, once again, we are working within restrictions, some biographical comment will be essential for a balanced understanding of the doctrinal development in context.[1] Without being drawn into a full debate, in a few instances we will suggest alternative interpretations which seem more harmonious with Wesley's intentions.

Projected Results

Using this combination of primary and secondary material part one of this study will work toward a synthesis of perspectives on prevenient grace in terms of major theological themes and categories. This will take the form of a spectrum, seeking to clarify the parameters of what can be called an authentically Wesleyan doctrine of prevenient grace. While this will certainly not be the last word on prevenient grace, it should provide a base for better understanding and evaluating present and future interpretations, especially those being offered in conjunction with contemporary applications.

From a more positive perspective, it is hoped that this clarification of the meaning of prevenient grace may stimulate fresh, creative applications in many forms of ministry praxis, especially in contexts where continuity with Wesleyan roots is still valued. The potential for application outside the Wesleyan tradition is great as well. Donal Dorr's comparison of Wesleyan and Roman Catholic perspectives on total de-

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1. Most of the recent approaches to Wesley's theology have been biographically oriented, recognizing the significance of Wesley's life and context for his theology. See Schmidt (1966); A. Wood (1967); and Tuttle (1978).

pravity and grace is just one example of a point for dialogue.[1] What else might a clearer understanding of prevenient grace within the global Wesleyan tradition today contribute to ecumenical concerns?[2]

A Formal Definition of Prevenient Grace

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) traces "prevenient" to Latin roots in the present participle of praevenire, offering this general definition: "coming before, preceding, previous, antecedent." More specifically it describes any dynamic "antecedent to human action." In its particular theological application, modifying "grace," the OED suggests: "the grace of God which precedes repentance and conversion, predisposing the heart to seek God, previously to any desire or motion on the part of the recipient." No doubt Wesley was familiar with the selection from Milton (1667) used for illustration (quoted in the older English spelling): "From the Mercie-seat above Prevenient Grace descending had removed The stonie from thir hearts, and made new flesh."

Although the term "prevenient grace" has become the standard designation in Wesleyan scholarship, Wesley himself spoke most often of "preventing grace." The OED traces "prevent" to the same Latin root,

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1. Dorr affirmed that no Catholic is "entitled to reject a priori the Wesleyan teaching on this point" -- a significant, if not radical statement in its time (1964:87).

2. Chapter two explores more fully Robert A. Mattke's demonstration of the usefulness of Fletcher's dialectical methodology for addressing such ecumenical concerns, as well (1975:38).

but with a slightly different aspect in its English usage: "To act before, in anticipation of, or in preparation for. . . to act as if the event or time had already come." In its application to theology, we find: "To go before with spiritual guidance and help: said of God, or of his grace anticipating human action or need." Focusing more specifically as it modifies God's grace, it is "held to be given in order to predispose to repentance, faith and good works." A quotation from a 1670 commentary serves to illustrate: "If thy grace prevented us before repentance, that we might turn, shall it not much more prevent repenting sinners that we may not perish?"

The OED mentions none of Wesley's many quotations. However, the examples given do indicate the general character of his lexical context. Wesley defined "prevent" as simply "to come or go before" in his own dictionary, The Complete English Dictionary Explaining Most of those Hard Words which are found in the Best English Writers (Rogers 1967:5n). With due respect to Wesley's dictionary, it will take more than this definition to capture the fullness of the term "prevenient grace" as he used it.

Prevenient Grace in Wesley's Own Words

Introduction

In turning to John Wesley's writings we must address two important considerations. First is the fact that most of Wesley's diverse printed legacy can account for only one level of Wesley's theological self-ex-

pression.[1] Yet, given a choice of only one, it seems that Wesley himself would select this particular level -- the level of his public, "street corner" self-expression -- by which to be best understood and evaluated. Wesley always expressed highest regard for "plain people," and absolute confidence in the capacity of "plain language" to convey essential biblical truth (Outler 1985:35). He believed that "every serious man who peruses these sermons [Wesley's 1746 edition] will see in the clearest manner what those doctrines are which I embrace and teach, as the essentials of true religion" (Works 1:48).

The second consideration is the well-known fact that Wesley did not leave his followers any single systematic statement of his theology.[2] Instead there is a multi-faceted collection of essays, sermons, tracts, letters, hymns, Bible commentary, a detailed journal, and edited extracts from writers he admired. This presents unique hermeneutical challenges.[3] It is difficult to find a methodology adequate to handle such diversity in a systematic way. Yet Albert Outler (1985:49) offered this

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1. In his preface to the latest edition of Wesley's Christology John Deschner identifies three levels of Wesley's theological self-expression: "the articulated theology of his writings, the presupposed theology behind the writings, and the enacted theology of his praxis" (1988:xii).

2. Any implication that Wesley was not systematic in his theology justifiably arouses some scholars to come to his defense (T. Smith 1980:68). The point here is simply to indicate that Wesley's very consistent, biblical theology was never written in what might be called a "systematic theology" in the same sense as Calvin's or Barth's, and that this makes the task of interpreters who favor this mode a bit more difficult.

3. But according to Outler this may not be a handicap, depending on one's perspective. Wesley's choice not to write in a more formally systematic genre can be seen as either "a weakness to be remedied or. . . a strength to be exploited" (1985:48).

comforting challenge:

> Methodists and other Christians are, and must be, free to do their theologizing in any genre that they find edifying, so long as this theologizing bear[s] the mark of careful basic homework in the Wesley texts.

After his life-time career in Wesley studies, Outler felt safe saying that Wesley's thought can stand on its own against a variety of analytical methodologies and still communicate authentically, provided it is given the chance to speak for itself. In the following section we will adopt the attitude of Wesley's "serious man" and highlight some of Wesley's "plainest" public statements on prevenient grace.

Key Emphases: Scripture and Salvation

Wesley's passion to know and communicate clearly the way of salvation revealed in "the Book of God" set the priorities of his life (Rogers 1967:5ff). The preface to the 1746 edition, Sermons on Several Occasions, articulates his primary concern: "Let me be homo unius libri," not as an end in itself, but because Scripture showed the way of salvation. In this spirit Wesley wrote, preached and published his sermons.[1]

With his brother Charles, Wesley accompanied these sermons, both in print and in practice, with a growing, rich collection of hymns which account to a large degree for the contagious success of the Methodist

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1. Wesley said, "I have accordingly set down in the following sermons what I find in the Bible concerning the way to heaven, with a view to distinguish this way of God from all those which are the inventions of men" (Works 1:105-106).

revival.[1] These sermons and hymns of the revival were remarkably compatible. They clearly shared a common concern for salvation, but they also shared a common source. While a debt to their literary heritage and Anglican liturgy shows in these hymns, Bible texts are by far the preferred source of both themes and images.[2] If the sermons reveal the heart of Wesley's theology, no less do the hymns. "By their texts ye shall know them," affirms Wesley's most recent hymn editor, adding, with perhaps a slight bias, "the prime source of Wesley's theology lies here [in the hymns]" (Works 7:5).

Prevenient Grace on the Path to Full Salvation

In his sermon "On Working Out Your Own Salvation," Wesley takes Phil. 2:12-13 as his text. In the process of interpreting these paradoxical verses, Wesley makes some of his clearest statements concerning the role of prevenient grace in the process of salvation. To Albert Outler -- speaking as the editor of the most recent and exhasutively annotated edition of Wesley's semons -- this sermon "stands as the late Wesley's most complete and careful exposition of the mystery of divine-human interaction, his subtlest probing of the paradox of prevenient grace and human agency" (Works 3:199). Writing nearly thirty years earlier, Robert E. Cushman called it "the most important single utter-

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1. Says Oliver A. Beckerlegge, "it is highly doubtful whether without the Hymns there could have been a Methodist revival" (Works 7:1).

2. Referring to his search for a particular obscure usage in a verse, Beckerlegge suggests that "the only safe guidance is the rule: 'if in doubt, it is scriptural'" (Works 7:5).

ance Wesley made upon the process of salvation" (1947:109).

Hear Wesley (Works 3:203):

> Salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) preventing grace; including the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against him. All these imply some tendency toward life; some degree of salvation; the beginning of deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God, and the things of God.

He continues by explaining prevenient grace in relation to other aspects of grace experienced by a person along the way to salvation.

> Salvation is carried on by convincing grace, usually in Scripture termed repentance; which brings a larger measure of self-knowledge, and a farther deliverance from the heart of stone. Afterwards we experience the proper Christian salvation; whereby, "through grace," we "are saved by faith"; consisting of those two grand branches, justification and sanctification.

These quotations describe concisely the role of prevenient grace in the common experience of most believers. It accounts for the gradual warming of heart, mind and will to the things of God prior to conversion. More than interpreting human experience, however, the doctrine of prevenient grace also played an important role in reconciling difficult polarities in Wesley's theology.[1] Prevenient grace enabled him to bridge the gap between fallen humanity's total dependence upon

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1. Like the Reformers, Wesley held a strong view of total human depravity that saw all persons helpless to save themselves by any human effort. With equal tenacity he held a life-long commitment to the more Arminian perspective of full human responsibility, not only for their behavior, but ultimately for their eternal destiny as well.

God's sovereign grace and the responsibility implicit in human freedom.[1]

A dual emphasis on human dependence and divine sovereignty dominates the beginning of the sermon. Wesley opens his argument by offering an alternative word order in his reading of the text (Phil. 2:12-13) in order to emphasize the fact that all God's efforts in our direction are purely grace-motivated, that is, only "of his good pleasure."[2]

> This position of the words. . . removes all imagination of merit from man, and gives God the whole glory of his own work. Otherwise we might have had some room for boasting, as if it were our own desert, some goodness in us, or some good thing done by us, which first moved God to work. But this expression cuts off all such vain conceits, and clearly shows his motive to work lay wholly in himself -- in his own mere grace, in his unmerited mercy. (Works 3:202)

For Wesley there was nothing more crucial for the person on the way to full salvation than a deep, existential awareness of helplessness and dependence upon the grace of God alone. In exegeting the phrase from the text, "both to will and to do," he shows that these inclinations and energies come only from God. "God breathes into us every good desire." Only God supplies "all that energy which works in us every

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1. "Basic to the relation of dependence and responsibility is prevenient grace" (Burtner & Chiles:1982:139).

Wesley's life, after his conversion in 1738, was plagued by controversy due largely to his opponents' lack of understanding (or acceptance) of his unique syntheses of biblical paradoxes. His emphasis on human responsibility often found him branded a Pelagian. Outler felt that Wesley did in fact find a defendable scriptural balance. Commenting on his sermon "On Working Out Your Own Salvation," he said, "If there were ever a question of Wesley's alleged Pelagianism, this sermon alone should suffice to dispose of it decisively" (Works 3:199).

2. The original reading is, "It is God that worketh in us both to will and to do his good pleasure." Wesley revises it to, "It is God that of his good pleasure worketh in you both to will and to do" (Works 3:202).

right disposition, and then furnishes us for every good word and work" (Works 3:203).

The primary value of this message for the person being saved is its potential to protect against the pride and self-deception which is the primary block to one's progress toward full salvation in Christ.[1] The essence of pride is confidence in a "natural" inclination or energy toward the good eclipsing one's awareness of a need for God's saving power. Wesley is concerned first to remove this block (Works 3:203).

> Nothing can so directly tend to hide pride from man as a deep, lasting conviction of this [the true source of redemptive power]. For if we are thoroughly sensible that we have nothing which we have not received, how can we glory as if we had not received it? If we know and feel that the very first motion of good is from above, as well as the power which conducts it to the end. . . then it evidently follows that "he who glorieth must glory in the Lord."

To this point, Wesley has affirmed the basic belief of most orthodox Christians: 1) God is the only source of all good in human expression, and 2) God's choice to activate good desires and energize good actions is purely grace-given, "of his good pleasure."

He next moves to the second part of the text which calls persons to "work out your own salvation." At first glance this appears to be nothing more than a strict appeal for Christians always to be good, to read the Bible, pray, take communion, practice unselfishness and use

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1. This salvation is tied to the "Christ hymn" in Phil. 2:5-11, the verses immediately preceding the text. Wesley is unwilling to settle for a vision of human salvation that falls short of this high example. To re-make persons in the image of Christ -- "let this mind be in you" -- is the purpose of Christ's coming. He says, "Having proposed the example of Christ, the Apostle exhorts them to secure the salvation which Christ hath purchased for them" (Works 3:202).

every means possible to get close to God. Following so close to his case for human helplessness, this call for heroic Christian virtue seems almost contradictory. Clearly Wesley is presupposing the infusion of some grace-given strength both to activate and sustain this kind of life. But what is the character of this grace? Who is it for? How does it relate to the "prevenient" and "convincing" grace already mentioned? What is its role in leading persons to salvation? The potential for misunderstanding here demands a parenthesis of more extensive commentary on Wesley's larger understanding of grace than he includes explicitly within the sermon itself.

According to the previous quotations Wesley sees a continuity in the flow of God's grace in persons, leading them to the goal of restoration "to the image of God" through the process of justification and sanctification. The particular function of grace in people's lives is always purposeful, drawing them toward the ultimate goal of this full salvation (Lindström 1980:126-127).

From the perspective of this goal one could describe all expressions of grace as essentially "saving grace." It is no doubt from this perspective that Wesley describes the initial effects of prevenient grace in a person prior to repentance, faith and "proper Christian salvation" as "some degree of salvation, the beginning of a deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart" (Works 3:204). However, from another perspective, Wesley seems to be quite clear in his emphasis upon more definitive transition points, and specific forms of grace to address specific human needs. Therefore, "prevenient" and "convicting" grace may be "saving" in their intent, yet until they are fulfilled in human

experience, they are not in themselves salvific.[1]

Within the continuity of grace and human progress in salvation, Wesley was aware of specific stages of real personal transformation, both prior to and following justification.[2] To Wesley these stages are part of the universal experience of all persons. Each one begins at the same point of broken relationship with God, yet all are under the influence of a potentially saving grace designed to bring reconciliation through a discernible process of transitions. This emphasis upon the specific stages -- first of conviction and repentance, followed by justification and sanctification[3] within a continuum of grace -- may best explain his use of specific modifiers such as "prevenient," "convicting," and "justifying" to describe the character of grace as it is experienced at certain junctures along the way to salvation.

For Wesley, salvation was a matter of definite experience, as opposed to a more abstract, credal affirmation (L. Wood 1975; English

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1. See Wesley's sermon on "The New Birth" (Works 2:186).

2. Notice the use of temporal language and specific, detailed empirical changes in the following section from the same sermon:

> All experience, as well as Scripture, shows this salvation to be both instantaneous and gradual. It begins the moment we are justified, in the holy, humble, gentle, patient love of God and man. It gradually increases from that moment, as a 'grain of mustard seed, which at first is the least of all seeds, but' gradually 'puts forth large branches', and becomes a great tree; till in another instant the heart is cleansed from all sin, and filled with pure love to God and man. But even that love increases more and more, till we 'grow up in all things into him that is our head', 'till we attain the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ' (Works 3:204).

3. Wesley called these the "two grand branches" of salvation (Works 3:204).

1985). This may account for his differentiation of specific expressions of grace to match the specific stages of spiritual experience, and so to particularize God's general, universal grace. However, it is crucial to distinguish between a purely descriptive understanding of the particular types of grace,[1] and a more ontological concept. Are these different types of grace simply phenomenological descriptions of human experiences of God at various stages of spiritual development, or are they specifically crafted and given by God?

In his differentiation of grace types, Wesley seems to suggest that God in his love and wisdom does tailor his grace to meet specific needs in persons, depending on their place on the road to full salvation. The distinct form of grace that some persons experience is in fact essentially different from the grace that would be appropriate for others. For example, the convicting grace that brings unregenerate persons to fear and despair over their separation from God, and to seek reconciliation, would be highly destructive to the fragile faith of a "new-born" Christian. Because the actual transformation of the person at the decisive points along the way is so definite in Wesley's mind, grace cannot be given in a "one-size-fits-all" manner, or left to be fitted by the person to his or her particular need. Wesley saw grace as

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1. Steve Harper (1983:40) emphasizes this more general aspect of grace by affirming that the distinction of grace types comes largely from the way individual persons, at particular times, experience it:

> Grace is grace. You do not have one kind of grace for one situation and another kind for some other situation. By the same token God does not give his grace in bits and pieces. We define grace in different ways because of how we experience the grace on our end of the relationship.

qualitatively need-specific in its origin in the saving will of God.

Wesley also believed that grace is distributed quantitatively on the basis of demonstrated receptivity. While an initial degree of potentially saving grace is the universal inheritance of all humanity through Christ, he saw the minute decisions for or against the influences of that measure of grace as determining its future increase or decrease in the life of the person. Positive response to the grace one has results in more grace given; resistance to that grace leads to the gradual diminishing of it's subtle nudgings. These considerations argue for a more ontological understanding of the specific grace forms. For Wesley, grace seems to be both experienced and given in specifically differing qualities and intensities. The form of grace persons receive is relative to their position and attitude on the path to full salvation.

This dynamic quality of grace in all its forms is determined by its salvation goal. The different expressions of grace are all the more diverse, and at times confusing, due to Wesley's belief that salvation is far more than justification.[1] Justification is the point of special spiritual empowerment at which the new Christian's journey toward full salvation in the perfection of "love for God and man" begins in earnest. Just as prevenient grace prepares an unreconciled person to repent and seek saving faith, so the purpose of the new empowering grace received at justification is to lead him or her to full salvation. In all cases, grace functions in "going before" persons to enable them to

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1. Although eminently decisive, the grace of God experienced in justification is only the beginning of salvation, not an end in itself.

pursue, with supernatural success, the God-given means for spiritual growth specific to each subsequent step along the way. For all persons, at all stages on the path toward full salvation, there is both a specific "next step," and the grace to take that step. This grace -- be it "prevenient," "convicting," "saving," or "sanctifying" -- gives persons both the needed ability to follow the path toward perfected relationship with God, and the responsibility for the action taken.

Returning now to the sermon, Wesley explains, "first, God works; therefore you can work. But this is not all. The infusion of this grace to work out one's salvation carries an imperative to make full use of its potential.[1] In Wesley's words, "God works; therefore you must work" (Works 3:296).

The real, existential impact of grace at every stage of spiritual growth demands a real, existential response from persons. This response then determines subsequent grace gifts. Up to this point in the sermon this has been Wesley's primary emphasis. Although he has mentioned the general function of prevenient grace, he has been particularly concerned with the function of grace in the life of the Christian after justification in the process leading to full salvation. Next, in the process of defending this position, he sheds important light on the function of the grace prior to justification, as well.

First, Wesley summarizes his view of natural human impotence. Just as Lazarus was unable to "come forth" from the dead until he had

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1. Randy L. Maddox, in "Responsible Grace: The Systematic Perspective of Wesleyan Theology" (1984:7) develops this theme as the core of Wesley's theology.

been given new life from a supernatural source, so "it is equally impossible for us to 'come' out of our sins, yea, or make the least motion toward it till he who hath all power in heaven and earth calls our dead souls to life" (Works 3:207). He then moves quickly to cover the inevitable attempt to find excuse from the implications of resurrected spiritual life on the grounds that God has yet to "quicken our souls." Wesley says that no such excuse exists for anyone. God has in fact "quickened" every person that comes into the world to some degree, not only those who are justified. In making this assertion Wesley provides more information about the specific purpose, function, and implications of prevenient grace in all persons (Works 3:207):

> For allowing that all the souls of men are dead in sin by nature, this excuses none, seeing that there is no man that is in a state of mere nature; there is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly void of the grace of God. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called 'natural conscience'. But this is not natural; it is more properly termed 'preventing grace'. Every man has a greater or less (sic) measure of this, which waiteth not for the call of man. Every one has sooner or later good desires; although the generality of men stifle them before they can strike deep root or produce any considerable fruit. Every one has some measure of that light, some faint glimmering ray, which sooner or later, more or less, enlightens every man that cometh into the world. And every one, unless he be of that small number whose conscience is seared as with a hot iron, feels more or less uneasy when he acts contrary to the light of his own conscience. So no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath.

In this paragraph Wesley paints a picture of practical prevenient grace in broad strokes: It is universal. It puts all persons automatically in a responsive mode to the grace "which waiteth not for the call of man." In figurative terms, prevenient grace puts all persons in the position of having to "make the next move" in their relationship with

God, no matter how small or uninformed that move might be. Wesley clearly depicts this as a mixed blessing. It gives all persons the opportunity to begin their journey toward reconciliation with God, but, if this grace-given option is rejected, it puts persons in a more reprehensible position than if they had received no grace at all. Prevenient grace shares the same goal-orientation of all God's saving purposes and activity among his human creation.

Through these quotations from Wesley the reader is able to get a convicting "feel" for the dynamic of prevenient grace, but this is still not a definitive explanation of the many ways in which it can function in the person's life. Wesley's language is powerfully rich, yet ambiguous and resistant to systematizing. This is due to his continuous artistic weaving of biblical language and evocative biblical metaphors, each of which deserving extensive exegesis. Within this last relatively short passage Wesley speaks of "quenching the Spirit," warns against the implications of a "seared conscience," draws upon the growth metaphor involving both "seed" and "fruit" images, and introduces the highly complex Johannine image of "light."

The same use of biblical images can be seen in the "practical divinity" (Works 7:1) of the Wesley hymns that allude to prevenient grace. Adding to the images already used in the sermon, Wesley sings the universal implications of prevenient grace in terms of the call to the "wedding feast" (Works 7:81):

> Come, sinners, to the gospel feast:
> Let every soul be Jesu's guest;
> Ye need not one be left behind,
> For God hath bidden all mankind.

The same motif is carried on through the Pauline description of Christ

as the "second Adam." On this basis of Christ's universal, redemptive love, the singer, though excluded from the first "Eden," is still justified in seeking personal "quickening" (Works 7:120):

> Adam, descended from above,
> Our loss of Eden to retrieve,
> Great God of universal love,
> If all the world through thee may live,
> In us a quickening spirit be,
> And witness thou hast died for me.

Finally, if God is the source of all "light," the sustainer of all "creation," and the one who precedes (prevents) every human effort in his direction, the singer of this hymn led to believe it is not presumptuous to hope for real personal contact with God (Works 7:201):

> Father of lights, from whom proceeds
> Whate'er thy every creature needs,
> Whose goodness, providently nigh,
> Feeds the young ravens when they cry;
> To thee I look; my heart prepare
> Suggest and hearken to my prayer.
>
> Since by thy light myself I see
> Naked, and poor, and void of thee,
> Thy eyes must all my thoughts survey,
> Preventing what my lips would say;
> Thou seest my want, for help they call,
> And ere I speak thou know'st them all.

The desire to interpret Wesley's many images into meaningful experiential categories continues to challenge Wesley scholars. The recurring question in Charles Rogers' research on preveninet grace is "how."[1] Granted its reality in human existence, how is prevenient grace experienced, how does it make a difference? Chapter two will

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1. He summarized his intentions: "The task of this study is to describe the nature and benefits of prevenient grace to man, and the precise functions of that grace in the process of justification and salvation" (Rogers 1967:17).

attempt to answer these questions by looking at the writings of John Fletcher which flesh out the implications of Wesley's theology. However, before turning to Fletcher, it may be well to comment briefly on some factors identified by Wynkoop which impact the interpretation of Wesley, and which especially address the uniqueness of Wesley's style and intentions.

The Challenge of Interpretation

This brief look at one of Wesley's definitive sermons and bits of hymns provides a glimpse of his understanding of prevenient grace as a foundation for later, more detailed analysis. It also suggests the difficulty of interpreting Wesley into language other than his own -- an important consideration when we look at the many attempts that have been made. Efforts toward systematizing Wesley's thought raise questions about the validity of trying to translate the biblical, experiential and metaphorical language of the Wesleyan revival into the categories of academic disciplines. In many ways the methodology by which other theological opinion leaders have been systematized does not apply so readily to Wesley. The reason for this may lie in the nature of John Wesley himself, as well as the uniqueness of the 18th-century Methodist revival (Wynkoop 1975:6-7). It is important to acknowledge these factors if one is to know how to approach Wesley.

In the 1975 presidential address to the Wesleyan Theological Society, Wynkoop suggested two points of view on Wesley -- Wesley seen as "mentor" or as "guru." There are those for whom Wesley is more the guru, a "master. . . to be followed, obeyed, believed, imitated, honored"

(1975:8), and scholarship done in this mode has a distinctive character. "When Wesley is considered a guru, the tendency is to rigidify his theological position into formularies rather than into theology/life orientations flowing out into the world" (1975:9). Wynkoop (1975:9-10) does not think this is in line with the character of Wesley:

> Formulas are necessary for clear thought, but necessarily logically restrictive. Life, however, is always greater than logic. Life and love are not irrational. . . , but they cannot be bound into the forms of logic and they do break out of the limitations of formularies.

She outlines an alternative approach in which Wesley is viewed as a "mentor" instead. Seeing him from this perspective, the early Methodists were quite different from some of their more "scholarly" counterparts today.

> Those around [Wesley] were encouraged to dig from the same mine he found so inexhaustible, the Bible and everything in life and literature that cast light on the meaning of religion. Ignorance and distaste for the study called forth his scorn. The vitality of intellect and spirituality to which he led men produced a worthy line of theologians stretching from the New Room in Bristol in Wesley's day to Europe and America today. A truly Wesleyan Wesleyanism is dynamic and vital and alert to contemporary issues, creative and free. (1975:8)

Objectively, what characterizes Wesley as a mentor more than a guru was the nature of his task within his own national and ecclesiastical context. In contrast to the Reformers, Wesley did not try to redefine essential theological and political categories. Instead, his goal was to "unlock the scholastic doors to allow the vibrant 'Word of God' to illuminate and vitalize the cold, correct Reformation theologies" (Wynkoop 1975:7) (emphasis added).

Following this reasoning, John Fletcher was one for whom Wesley

was not only a close friend and comrade, but a "mentor" in the fullest sense of Wynkoop's definition.[1] In the following chapter we will look at Fletcher's efforts to explain Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace.

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1. Timothy L. Smith (1980:69) agrees: "John Fletcher became the theologian of early Methodism not because he brought system where none had been, but because he followed Wesley's advice and example of making Scripture the source and criterion of ordered understanding."

CHAPTER 2

WESLEY'S DOCTRINE OF PREVENIENT GRACE SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF JOHN FLETCHER

Biographical Introduction

In trying to justify John Fletcher's prominent place in Methodist theology or defend his first right to interpret Wesley's thought, it is tempting to be drawn into the fascinating story of his life and long friendship with Wesley. It is a story often told with meaningful reflection in Methodist circles.[1]

The October 1960 London Quarterly and Holborn Review published Frank Baker's commemoration of Fletcher on the bicentennial of his appointment to the parish at Madeley, Shropshire. In it Baker describes the amazing, "providential" chain of events that brought Fletcher, a young Swiss surveyor and soldier on his way to Brazil, to his eventual conversion under Methodist ministry and ordination in the Church of England (291-294).[2]

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1. See Mattke (1968:38); T. Smith (1980:68); Wiggins (1966).

2. Fletcher found in the Methodists, people who shared his concern for holy living. They also understood his life-time struggle to achieve righteousness through his own efforts. Through the ministry of the London societies, in January 1755 Fletcher came into his own experience of liberating justification by faith, and almost immediately began preaching in the Methodist societies. His ordination in the Church of England made him even more useful to the Methodist ministry, and Wesley was disappointed when Fletcher decided to accept an

Luke Tyerman's classic biography, Wesley's Designated Successor (1882) places Fletcher alongside John and Charles Wesley forming the leadership core of the Methodist revival.[1] But this fact alone does not account for the heart-felt collegiality that characterized the relationship between Fletcher and the Wesleys. On two occasions John Wesley had begged Fletcher to consider being his successor to lead the Methodist revival (Baker 1960:296). Ironically, the older Wesley was to outlive Fletcher by five years. Wesley preached Fletcher's funeral, concluding his sermon with:

> Many exemplary men have I known, holy in heart and life, within four score years. But one equal to him, I have not known: one so inwardly and outwardly devoted to God. So unblamable a character in every respect I have not found in Europe or America. And I scarce expect to find another such, on this side of eternity. (Baker 1960:297)

Later, in the introduction to his biography of Fletcher, Wesley (1805:iii) summarized the character of their relationship:

> No man in England has had so long an acquaintance with Mr. Fletcher as myself. . . . Nor was ours a slight or ordinary acquaintance; but we were of one heart and one soul. We had no secrets between us for many years: we did not purposely hide anything from each other.

..Continued...

appointment to the parish of Madeley. Later this more settled form of ministry proved to be the base from which Fletcher would make his greatest contribution to the Wesleyan revival through his written defenses of Methodist theology (Baker 1960:293-294).

1. "John Wesley traveled, formed societies, and governed them. Charles Wesley composed unequaled hymns. . . ; and John Fletcher, native of Calvinian Switzerland explained, elaborated and defended the doctrines they heartily believed" (Mattke 1968:38).

Fletcher's Role in the Antinomian Controversy

John Fletcher's ministry was certainly broader than his involvement with the controversy that brewed to a boil between 1769 and 1770 (Coppedge 1987:191-220). Yet within this context his role as Wesley's theological interpreter and defender emerged.[1]

For our purposes it is not necessary to trace the development of the controversy to its crisis point.[2] The crucial event was Wesley's publication of the "Extracts from the Minutes" of the August 7, 1770 Methodist Conference. Looking back over the last twenty-six years Wesley once again expressed his concern over the tendency toward antinomianism which he sensed within the Calvinist element of the revival. "We said in 1744, 'We have leaned too much toward Calvinism.' Wherein?" (Fletcher 1:8). The few terse comments[3] with which Wesley answered his own question ignited a powerful response from an already

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1. Up to this point both Calvinistic and Arminian tendencies had coexisted somewhat peacefully within the Methodist revival. That the two had held together this long showed the effective balance between Wesley's twin emphases on 1) total human helplessness with salvation by grace through faith alone, and 2) full human responsibility with a vision of true holiness of heart and life. As we have seen from the sermon "On Working Out Your Own Salvation," the key to this balance lay in Wesley's concept of grace as the universal awakening, convicting, and empowering dynamic for inward and outward regeneration leading to full salvation. It was this essential doctrine that Fletcher was to defend so persuasively and establish in the Methodist theology.

2. This is available in Coppedge's work (1987:191-220).

3. Later Wesley saw that the wording of the minutes was not "sufficiently guarded," and provided clarification saying, "we solemnly declare . . . that we have no trust or confidence but in the alone merits of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ . . . ; our works have no part in meriting, or purchasing our salvation from first to last, either in whole or in part" (Chiles 1965:145). But by then the battle lines with the Calvinists were already drawn.

sensitive group within the Methodist movement.[1] These circulated a petition to convene a separate conference for the purpose of demanding from Wesley a "formal recantation of the said Minutes." Should Wesley refuse, the letter threatened to take the debate into public press (Fletcher 1:7).

The language of the letter was harsh, accusing Wesley of "dreadful heresy." The subversive strategy of calling a meeting to conflict intentionally with Wesley's own next scheduled conference seemed calculated to split the Methodist movement. Both the gravity of the charge and the manner in which it was delivered were enough to move Fletcher to come to Wesley's defense,[2] although he was not by nature inclined to controversy (Wiggins 1966:9).

Fletcher's public response came in the form of an essay, the first in what would be a series of polemical pieces.[3] It was published under

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1. In their opinion Wesley had finally committed himself in print, to a clearly Pelagian position of "salvation by works." With what Fletcher felt to be inadequate explanation, Wesley had stated:

> 1. Who of us is now accepted of God?
> He that now believes in Christ with a loving, obedient heart.
> 2. But who among those who never heard of Christ?
> He that feareth God, and worketh righteousness accord ing to the light he has. (Fletcher 1:8)

Note: Wesley's almost direct quotation from Acts 11:35 in this last statement.

2. He asked, "may not I, an old friend and acquaintance of his [Wesley's], be permitted to speak a word in his favour, before he is branded in the forehead, as he has already been on the back" (Fletcher 1:11).

3. Other key polemical works in addition to the "Checks," include: "The Fictitious and Genuine Creed" (1:393); "The Doctrines of Grace and Justice" (2:261); and "The Scripture Scales" (2:9).

the abridged title of First Check to Antinomianism; or A Vindication of the Rev. Mr. Wesley's Minutes. The lengthy descriptive subtitle reveals the spirit and intention of the work, which was

> designed to remove prejudice, check rashness, promote forbearance, defend the character of an eminent minister of Christ, and prevent some important scriptural truths from being hastily branded as heretical.

It is inscribed "by a lover of quietness and liberty of conscience" (Fletcher 1:title page).

The Structure of Fletcher's Defense

In conducting his defense of Wesley, Fletcher follows the methodology of the law courts by answering charges that have been brought against his "client." He appeals to his frequent contact with Wesley, and the many times he has heard him speak over a period of sixteen years in order to vindicate Wesley's consistency of character and message. Fletcher then moves to examine and vindicate Wesley's orthodoxy on the basis of several fundamental points of doctrine: the "total Fall of man in Adam," "Christ the only way of salvation" (Fletcher 1:12), and the consistent emphasis on "holiness of heart and life" (1:13).[1]

In the process of the defense, Fletcher addressed many aspects of Wesley's theology, but the core issue which inflamed reaction from the Calvinists was Wesley's emphasis upon the need to "work out" our own salvation. Their alarm was not entirely without grounds, for taken

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1. Through it all Fletcher makes expert use of Scripture and the doctrines of the Church of England; he even appeals to the writings of Wesley's attackers in which they plainly support Wesley's message (Fletcher 1:27).

outside the context of Wesley's understanding of empowering grace, it would seem that he was in fact advocating some kind of "works righteousness."[1] What Fletcher sought to elucidate, was Wesley's firm conviction that only by grace could any even remotely "good" thing be done by fallen humans. According to Wesley, this grace, which flowed from Christ's atonement, was available to and functional in all persons, at all times. It carried with it both the possibility and the imperative of practical application leading to full salvation. In short, Fletcher's work was largely a study of prevenient grace.

Fletcher's Summary of Wesley's Core Theology

To provide the context for Fletcher's later arguments, let us briefly trace the outline of his defense of Wesley's larger theology in his own words (Fletcher 1:11):[2]

> I have heard him [Wesley], upon every proper occasion, steadily maintain the total Fall of man in Adam, and his utter inability to recover himself, or take any one step toward his recovery, "without the grace of God preventing him, that he may have a good will, and working with him when he has that good will" . . . and I have ever observed that he constantly ascribes to Divine Grace, not only the good works and holy tempers of believers, but all the good thoughts of upright heathens . . . .

Fletcher leaves no doubt as to Wesley's firm christological foun-

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1. In the Minutes Wesley had also stated baldly, "Whereas we are every hour and every moment pleasing or displeasing to God, according to our works: according to the whole of our inward and our outward behavior" (Fletcher 1:9).

2. These lengthy quotations are significant, not only for what they affirm, but for the specific language used, if we are to get a clear picture of Fletcher's thought process.

dations for all God's work in humanity by emphasizing the uniqueness of Christ and the dangers of imagining any human origin for righteousness.

> I must likewise testify that [Wesley] faithfully points out Christ as the only way of salvation; and . . . faith as the only means of receiving him and all the benefits of his righteous life and meritorious death: . . . and he frequently expresses his detestation of the errors of modern Pharisees, who laugh at original sin, set up the powers of Fallen man, cry down the operation of God's Spirit, deny the absolute necessity of the blood and righteousness of Christ, and refuse him the glory of all good that may be found in Jew or Gentile. (1:12)

In addition to Wesley's commitment to the uniqueness and necessity of Christ as the only way to salvation, Fletcher commends Wesley's high view of the sufficiency of the atonement to provide for real transformation in a person's life (1:13):

> The next fundamental doctrine in Christianity is that of holiness of heart and life . . . . Mr. Wesley . . . sets him [Christ] forth as a complete Saviour from sin. Not satisfied to preach holiness begun, he preaches finished holiness, and calls believers to such a degree of heart-purifying faith, as may enable them to triumph in Christ, as "being made to them of God, sanctification as well as righteousness."

Fletcher seems to realize that such language would be easily misunderstood, and often energetically rejected by some Christians.[1] For this reason, he lists a long litany of scriptures which both command and promise the kind of purity Wesley has included among the privileges of Christians on the basis of the atonement. Such an emphasis had gained for Wesley a reputation as a Pharisee himself in lifting too high a standard of behavior. This Fletcher tried to correct. He

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1. With tongue in cheek, he suggests that it has been Wesley's "misfortune . . . to preach a fuller salvation than most professors [professing Christians] expect to enjoy here [on earth]" (13).

portrays Wesley offering (and demanding) nothing more than is found in a plain reading of the Bible.[1]

It was also on the basis of Scripture that Wesley affirmed the "general" universal reach of Christ's redemption -- that "Christ, by the grace of God, tasted death for every man," and that "Christ is the Saviour of all men, but especially of them that believe." Fletcher reviews the key scriptures which highlight the universality of the gospel provisions and the gospel invitation (1:15).[2]

This universal provision of redeeming grace has immediate implications, and raises questions: How is grace at work; if it is universal, what difference does it make? Fletcher approaches the question, like Wesley, by affirming again what people would be like without this

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1. "But I must . . . do him the justice to say that he has been misapprehended, and that what he calls perfection is nothing but the rich cluster of all the spiritual blessings promised to believers in the Gospel" (1:14-15).

2. These Scriptures plainly challenge any concept of a restricted grace, limited atonement, or any "doctrine of particular redemption." Speaking for Wesley, Fletcher (1:15) says, "Nor can he help expressing his surprise at those pious ministers who maintain that the Saviour keeps his grace, as they suppose he kept his blood, from the greatest part of mankind . . . ."

Fletcher further advances his counter-challenge by showing that a doctrine of "particular redemption" is contrary to the doctrine of the Church of England implicit within its liturgy. To both Wesley and Fletcher it is incomprehensible how some priests could hold a concept of

> particular redemption and at the same time say to each of their communicants, "the blood of Christ was shed for thee;" and to baptize promiscuously all children within their respective parishes, "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost," when all that are unredeemed have no more right to the blood, name, and Spirit of Christ, than Lucifer himself. (1:16)

Clearly Wesley and Fletcher see in this an absurd contradiction.

grace. He does not believe in any residual "power" or potential within persons which they might use to seek after God. Without grace the human condition is characterized by bondage to evil (1:16):

> Mr. Wesley . . . strongly asserts the total fall of man, and constantly maintains that by nature man's will is only free to evil, and that Divine grace must first prevent, and then continually farther (sic) him, to make him willing and able to turn to God.

Here is the crucial point in Wesley's balance between total depravity and human responsibility. Wesley believed that such was humanity's fallen condition that the grace of God must first transform them to the extent that they have the freedom to respond positively to any further overtures of grace. By way of summary, it is important first to emphasize that this freedom depends on a real, definite transformation, the recreation of something totally lost. It does not spring from a remnant of humanity's pre-Fall potentials. Second, this freedom is essential to any next step in God's direction. In Fletcher's words, "none are converted but those who have a free will to follow Jesus" (1:16). Third, this grace-given freedom is universally restored to all humanity by virtue of Christ's atonement. Such freedom is the presupposition of all further communication between God and human beings.[1]

As we have discussed, the universality of this initial, freedom-restoring "preventing" grace is the basis for Wesley's concept of uni-

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1. Fletcher states (1:16):

> [Wesley] affirms it is as essential to all men to be "free-willing creatures," as to be "rational animals;" and he supposes he can as soon find a diamond or a flint without gravity, as a good or bad man without free will.

versal human responsibility. It puts all persons in the position where some degree of meaningful, responsible interaction with God is not only possible, but unavoidable. It also means that all such human interactions with God's subsequent grace-gifts have eternal significance. Fletcher is quick to point out just how much this perspective enhances God's glory without compromising his love and integrity (1:19):

> Thus [Wesley] advances God's glory every way, entirely ascribing to his mercy and grace all the salvation of the elect, and completely freeing him from the blame of directly or indirectly hanging the millstone of damnation about the neck of the reprobate.

The subsequent explanation clarifies in moving, relational language the meaning of human responsibility in the face of God's grace. Of the elect and the reprobate,

> the former owe all they are, and all they have, to the creating, preserving, and redeeming love, whose innumerable bounties they freely and continually receive; and that the rejection of the latter has absolutely no cause but their obstinate rejecting of that astonishing mercy which wept over Jerusalem; and prayed, and bled even for those who shed the atoning blood -- the blood that expiated all sin but that of final unbelief. (1:19)

This concept of the universal effect of God's "preventing" grace radically redefines the traditional Reformed understanding of what determines a person's eternal destiny. As we will see later, Wesley recognized in Christ's death the provision for a form of initial salvation for every person such that Fletcher could boldly affirm, "none perish for Adam's sin, but for their own unbelief, and willful rejection of the Saviour's grace" (1:18-19).

In broad strokes this completes Fletcher's construction of Wesley's theological platform. By way of summary, he defines Wesley's

essential position in terms of "two axioms,[1] of which he never loses sight in his preaching" (1:17):

> The first is that all our salvation is of God in Christ and therefore of grace; -- all opportunities, invitations, inclination, and power to believe being bestowed upon us of mere grace; -- grace most absolutely free. . . . Secondly, [Wesley] asserts with equal confidence, that according to the Gospel dispensation, all our damnation is of ourselves, by our obstinate unbelief and avoidable unfaithfulness; as we "neglect so great salvation," desire to "be excused" from coming to the feast of the Lamb, "make light of" God's gracious offers, refuse to "occupy," bury our talent, and act the part of the "slothful servant;" or in other words, "resist, grieve, do despite to," and "quench the Spirit" of Grace, by our moral agency.

We have noted Wesley's artistic and persuasive weaving of biblical images and metaphors, especially those taken from the parables and teachings of Jesus. The previous quotations reveal Fletcher's preference for the same methodology. In the following section we will examine how Fletcher used Scripture to clarify and defend more specifically Wesley's concept of prevenient grace.

Fletcher's Use of Scriptural Metaphors

There is a vigorous and persuasive clarity in Fletcher's writings.[2] Timothy L. Smith says of Fletcher, "He brought not novelty of substance but a refreshing variation of style to the proclamation of biblical Wesleyanism" (T. Smith 1980:69). However, the distinctiveness of

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1. The substance of the "two Gospel axioms" is expanded and defended by Fletcher in the essay, "The Doctrines of Grace and Justice Equally Essential to the Pure Gospel" (2:259).

2. Wesley himself offered this evaluation of Fletcher's work: "One knows not which to admire most -- the purity of the language, the strength and clearness of the argument, or the mildness and sweetness of the spirit that breaths throughout the whole" (Mattke 1968:40).

Fletcher's style may not lie so much in its variation from Wesley's, as in his ability to use a similar approach with even greater effectiveness. Fletcher "followed Wesley's advice and example of making Scripture the source and criterion of ordered understanding. He steeped himself in the Bible . . . ." (T. Smith 1980:69). Of himself Fletcher remarked, "If I may depend upon the settled sentiments of my mind and the warm feeling of my heart, I am determined . . . to live and die a consistent Bible Christian" (2:19). This parallel to Wesley's desire to be "homo unius libri" shows in all of Fletcher's works.[1]

Dedication to the whole Bible and determination to find in it an integrated guide to a real, experiential salvation energized both Wesley and Fletcher to search for an authentic synthesis of apparently irreconcilable contradictions in Scripture.[2] However, there is a practical aspect to their use of scriptural language in this process. Only within the highly figurative scriptural language could they find categories both strong and flexible enough to contain meaningfully the spiritual realities they saw in Scripture and experienced in the life of the revival. Being determined to compromise neither genuine experience nor

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1. See especially the "Scripture Scales" (Fletcher 2:11-258).

2. See Fletcher's essay, "Doctrines of Grace and Justice" (2:259). It is important to realize that these concerns are not purely theological. The Wesleyan contention for the reality of human freedom has a clear experiential component in addition to the supporting affirmations of Scripture. See Fletcher (2:269). See also Laurence Wood's discussion of Lockean aspects in Wesley's epistemology. Faith also supports Wesley's commitment to the reality and validity of experience. Otherwise, the elaborate matrix of human senses and rational processing becomes a grand scheme of deception from the Creator, deceiving man into "believing as true something that is false" (L. Wood 1975:51, 54-55).

Scripture, they were led into new applications of the familiar Biblical imagery. The uniqueness and success of this early Methodist approach warrants some further discussion.

Fletcher observed that such a synthesis seemed always to have eluded the church.[1] He traces the excesses and over-reactions of Augustine, Pelagius and the primary theologians of the Reformation (2:259-282), and concludes that the English reformer, Thomas Cranmer[2], came closest to synthesis by virtue of his insistence on balancing the two "Gospel axioms" mentioned above. Fletcher quotes Cranmer with his own notations inserted (2:274):

> All men be monished and chiefly preachers, that, in this high matter, they, looking on both sides [i.e. looking both to the doctrines of grace and the doctrines of justice], so attemper and moderate themselves, that neither they so preach the grace of God [with heated Augustine], that they take away thereby free-will, nor on the other side so extol free-will [with heated Pelagius], that injury be done to the grace of God.

For Fletcher the greatest threat to vital, practical Christianity came "whenever the polarity between divine sovereignty and human responsibility was neutralized" (Mattke:1968:43). On the one side of imbalance lay the perennial trap of what Fletcher called "Phariseeism" in its many varied forms. On the other side was the trap of "antinomianism,"

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1. Robert A. Mattke's article (1968:38), "John Fletcher's Methodology in the Antinomian Controversy of 1770-76," gives a clear discussion of Fletcher's "dialectical" methodology.

2. Fletcher summaries this section of the essay with the following comment indicating his overall evaluation of Cranmer (2:273):

> Luther and Calvin do not restore the balance of the Gospel axioms -- That honour was reserved for Cranmer, the English reformer, who modeled the Church of England very nearly according to the primitive Gospel.

which both he and Wesley feared more than anything else would destroy the evangelical revival then spreading across Britain and into the New World. The reason for this strong apprehension was the fact that genuine holiness of heart and life, which was the core of the movement, relied equally on the twin principles of 1) total and complete dependence upon grace from first to last, and 2) real inward and outward manifestation of Godliness in the temper and behavior of the Christian.

Fletcher saw the recurring patterns of extremism and corresponding areas of neglect rooted in two nearly unavoidable tendencies in the theologizing process. First, theology is always done in context, and is almost always motivated by a perceived need to correct an imbalance. In the effort to emphasize the opposite side, the result is usually skewed toward the second, correcting extreme, which only initiates another counter-response. This is what Fletcher found in his reflections upon doctrinal development through the ages (2:268-277).[1]

A second problematic tendency in doing theology is the use of overly hard, abstract categories which destroy the delicate paradoxes with their demands for extreme black or white clarity. When the distinction between two equally valid, but opposing truths is too radically drawn it destroys them both (Mattke 1968:43).

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1. Fletcher's own words describe this eloquently (2:274):

> Mankind are prone to run to extremes. The world is full of men who always overdo or underdo. Few people ever find the line of moderation, the golden mean; and of those who do, few stay long upon it. One blast or another of vain doctrine soon drives them east or west from the meridian of pure truth.

Fletcher's lengthy essay, "Scripture Scales, To Weigh the Gold of Gospel Truth" (2:9-258) epitomizes his commitment to balancing apparently opposing verses against their counterparts in order to find the true "Gospel" synthesis, or the "middle way."[1] One can feel the energy with which he addresses the abuses coming from one-sided readings of the Scripture, and which invariably result in a caricature of God's nature.[2] He demands that all references to salvation by faith, e.g. Romans 4:5 and 5:1, be balanced with equally powerful exhortations for the importance of working, e.g. Jesus' warnings of judgment on the basis of compassionate action (Matt. 25:31ff). "Any proof-text method not balanced by this dialectical methodology was thought by Fletcher to be potentially dangerous" (Mattke 1968:44).[3]

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1. For more discussion of Fletcher's "middle way" methodology, see John A. Knight, "John Fletcher's Influence on the Development of Wesleyan Theology in America" (1978:13).

2. Referring to the Calvinist doctrine of eternal decrees of election to salvation and election to wrath, Fletcher exclaims (2:17):

> I protest against doctrines of grace, which cannot stand without such doctrines of wrath. I protest against an exalting of Christ, which so horribly debases God. I protest against a new-fangled Gospel, which holds forth a robe of finished salvation, lined with such irreversible and finished damnation.

3. Apparently Fletcher believed that the origin of the attack against Wesley was due at least in part to such a faulty methodology, and the failure to realize that certain situations call for different messages than others if a balance is to be maintained (1:120):

> [I]f St. Paul had been in St. James's circumstances, he would have preached justification in as guarded a manner as St. James; and . . . if St. James had been in St. Paul's place he would have preached it as freely as St. Paul; . . . in some places St. Paul himself seems even more legal that St. James. See Rom 2:7, 10, 14; Gal. 6:7ff, and I Tim. 6:19.

Having discussed the rationale behind Fletcher's (and Wesley's) dialectical method, and the significance of biblical language within it, we return to the question of prevenient grace and how it affects human experience.

Fletcher's Key Metaphors of Prevenient Grace

While making use of a full compliment of scriptural examples, Fletcher simplifies his approach by isolating two major, controlling metaphors or models from within the biblical language. Both have the capacity to explain and integrate the others.[1] The first is the description of prevenient grace in terms of the "talents" given to the servants in Jesus' parable (Matt. 25:14). The second is the more general scriptural metaphor of "light" (John 1:9).[2] In the following paragraph Fletcher weaves "talents" and "light" together[3] in order to defend Wesley against a charge of advocating salvation by works (1:131):

> In this Scriptural view of free grace, what room is there for the ridiculous cavil that "Mr. Wesley wants the dead to

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1. For a more thorough understanding of Wesley's (and Fletcher's) use of scriptural language and metaphors, see Alden Aiken's article, "Wesleyan Theology and the Use of Models" (1979:64). His major thesis is that "in order to speak meaningfully of God we must use words that have an empirical base, words that are associated with the bare facts of human existence." However there is no such adequate language to explain human interactions with God. This "eludes direct statement." Although "no one model can ever reflect a full understanding of a spiritual experience," they can be used effectively by "spread[ing] the models out before our minds" and allowing them to "qualify one another" such that we end up with a "significant disclosure" of the spiritual reality we are trying to understand (1979:65-66).

2. These two metaphors together carry the double character of grace as both incrementally specific, and continuous.

3. See Aikens (1979:69).

> work for life?" God, of his infinite mercy in Jesus Christ, gives to poor sinners, naturally dead in sin, a talent of free, preventing, quickening grace, which "reproves them of sin;" and when it is followed, of "righteousness and judgment." This, which some Calvinists call common grace, is granted to all without respect of persons; so that even the poor Jew, Herod, if he had not preferred the smiles of Herodias to the convincing light of Christ which shone in his conscience, would have been saved as well as John the Baptist; and that poor heathen, Felix, if he had not hardened his heart in the day of his visitation, would have sweetly experienced that Christ had as much tasted death for him as he did for St. Paul . . . . They quenched their 'smoking flax,' or, in other words, their talent unimproved was justly "taken from them."

In harmony with the central affirmations of the Reformers,[1] Fletcher holds that salvation is free and only from God. However, contrary to the Reformers, it is not communicated to persons in its finished form. God's grace, like the "talents," remains subject to the affirming or neglecting actions of free human beings, who will stand under God's judgment for their use of the grace and empowering freedom they received.[2]

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1. Regarding Fletcher's use of the term "common grace" above: He seems to be making an allowance in his terminology, perhaps for the sake of dialogue with Calvinists. In strict terms "prevenient grace" is not truly parallel to "common grace" except in the sense that both are generally given to all persons. Calvin's "common grace" is not continuous with saving grace, nor can it lead anyone but the elect to salvation. "Common grace" refers only to "common and external things, which do not pertain to the Kingdom of God." Calvin asserts further that "Man is not possessed of free will for good works, unless he be assisted by grace, and that special grace is bestowed on the elect alone in regeneration" (1964:50). For a further discussion see (Calvin 1964:46-48, 50-51).

2. Using another metaphor [see Hebrews 12:1ff], Fletcher (2:113) warns his readers to

> carefully distinguish between our election to run the race of faith and holiness, according to one or another of the of the divine dispensations; and between our election to re-

The talent metaphor effectively reconciles many of the more difficult contradictions of salvation by grace alone, human freedom, and divine love, justice and sovereignty. To account for the great disparity between the graces given to various people and various contexts, Fletcher simply affirms that God sovereignly chooses to give some people one "talent" of his initial saving grace, while choosing to give others five or ten. Yet all people, everywhere and throughout history, have had at least one "talent," and this one has been sufficient to lead them to their just final salvation or damnation, depending upon how they have used it. Fletcher believed that "no man is born an absolute reprobate in Calvin's sense of the word; that 'God is loving to every man' for Christ's sake; and that, of consequence, there is a Gospel dispensation for every man" (2:265).

Fletcher also speaks of this "Gospel dispensation" in terms of "light," just as formerly he described it in terms of "talents." Here the "talent" and the "light" metaphors merge and reveal their interchangeability in Fletcher's thought. The following passage from Fletcher's "Fictitious and Genuine Creed" (1:414) develops the former "talent" idea from the perspective of "light":

> We believe that out of mere mercy and rich free grace in Jesus Christ, without any respect to foreseen repentance, faith or goodness, God places all men in a state of initial salvation; electing them to that state according to the mysterious counsel of his distinguishing love, which places some under bright and direct beams of Gospel truth; while he

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> ceive the prize -- a crown of glory . . . The former of these elections is always unconditional; but the latter is always suspended upon the reasonable condition of persevering in the obedience of faith.

> suffers others to receive the external light only through that variety of clouds which we call Calvinism, Popery, Judaism, and Mohammedanism; leaving most in Gentilism, that is in the dispensation under which Cain, Abel, Abimelech, king of Gerear and Melchisedec, king of Salem, formerly were.

In affirming this, Fletcher makes a radical departure from the Calvinism of his day as he uses the light metaphor to emphasize the continuity of grace in even its most obscured forms. For Fletcher this light has only one source, "the true light that gives light to every man" which had become flesh in Jesus Christ (John 1:9).[1] Although the "brightness" of the light may vary, as well as the density of the "clouds" through which it must "shine," the light that filters through has always had potential to lead to salvation, if met with receptivity in free human beings. Fletcher boldly accepts the implications of his argument by asserting that even "the very heathens are not without some light and grace to work suitably to their dispensation" (1:31).

Such statements do not imply that Fletcher believed all people would be finally saved. In fact he is not that optimistic (1:410, 416). Still he affirms that all people could be saved. "For Christ, the Light of men, visits all, though in a variety of degrees and dispensations" (1:41).

Within the context of the "light" metaphor, Fletcher is able to maintain the uniqueness of Christ as the only way to salvation. This is true even if Christ is mediated to them through the obscuring filters of

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1. Wesley's Notes on the New Testament for John 1:9 give his parallel perspective: This light is "vulgarly termed natural conscience, pointing out at least the general outlines of good and evil. And this light, if man did not hinder, would shine more and more to the perfect day."

other, even "heathen" dispensations (1:41).

> All heathens that are saved are then saved by a lively faith in Jesus, "the light of the world;" or to use our Lord's own words, by "believing in the light" of their dispensation, before the day of their visitation is past, before total "darkness comes upon them" even the night when "no man can work."

This radical concept is dependent upon a strong view of the atoning work of Christ, such that what Christ accomplished on our behalf has objective implications whether or not we have explicit knowledge of the cross and resurrection. Fletcher asks rhetorically (1:40):

> Is it not possible that heathens should, by grace, reap some blessings through the second Adam, though they know nothing of his name and obedience unto death; when they, by nature, reap so many curses through Adam the first; to whose name and disobedience they are equally strangers?

To understand this "salvation" that comes to all people, even those without a clear knowledge of Christ, it is important to see Fletcher's (and Wesley's) distinction between initial justification and final, public justification.[1] Christ's atonement provides for all persons "temporal" salvation. This gives each person, even those in the most limited "Gospel dispensation," an option for salvation appropriate to that

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1. Fletcher explains (1:403):

> We [Methodists] believe that Jesus Christ died for the whole human race, with an intention, first, to procure absolutely and unconditionally a temporary redemption, or initial salvation for all men universally; and second to procure a particular redemption, or an eternal salvation conditionally for all men, but absolutely for all that die in their infancy, and for all the adult who obey him and are 'faithful unto death' . . . . God, for Christ's sake, affords all men proper means, abilities, and opportunities to 'work out their own salvation,' or to make 'their calling and conditional election' to the eternal blessings of their respective dispensations 'sure'.

dispensation, or in other words, a "day of salvation" in which they can choose life or death (2:269). The final, eternal justification is that which is given by God's final judgment to those who follow a life of obedient faithfulness to their initial, "temporal" salvation. This is the final pronouncement of "well done thou good and faithful servant" and it is conferred on the basis one's actual working use of their initial grace.

From this it is clear that Fletcher is in no way proposing a Christless or graceless salvation. Nor is he visualizing an imaginary kind of salvation existing in some invisible "spiritual" realm. Given the limitations of those starting with only one "talent," or a very dim, heavily clouded "dispensation" of "light," even these are intended and fully able to follow their light to real transformation. Thus God is justified in making his final judgment on the basis of "works." But this transformation is still all by grace; "the light, the works of righteousness done by that light, and the acceptance in consequence of them" (1:40).

Before leaving Fletcher, there are two other matters which require attention. The first concerns his understanding of the role of other religions or traditions through which the Gospel "light" filters in human perceptions.[1] Fletcher seems to see himself as one of those blessed

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1. The following explanation of the major "clouds" which obscure the "light" indicates more specifically Fletcher's perspective (1:414n):

> Calvinism is Christianity obscured by mists of Pharisaic election and reprobation, and by a cloud of stoical fatalism. Popery is Christianity under a cloud of Pharisaic

with "bright and direct beams of Gospel truth" by virtue of his circumstances, which provided exposure to the Scripture, and his grace-given ability to interpret it by clear reason and submissive faith.[1] He also felt fortunate to be seeking God within the tradition of the English Reformation, which he saw to have come close to the ideals and doctrinal formulations of the Early Church (2:273). However, it was not the tradition of the Anglican church that was significant for him, except in the fact that it provided a relatively clear channel for the "Gospel truth." Likewise, for Fletcher, it is not the particular religions or traditions of other people which lead them to salvation, but the degree of "Gospel truth" which passes through them.

A second issue concerns the apparent difference between Fletcher and Wesley on the precise meaning of prevenient grace. In Wesley we saw that prevenient grace served a very specific purpose in that it came before and prepared the way for a decisive transition point at conversion. Fletcher, however, is less explicit in his definition of discrete stages in the Christian's developmental pattern. And for this reason it

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> bigotry, and under thick fogs of heathenish superstition. Judaism is Christianity under the veil of Moses. Mohammedanism is a jumble of Christianity, Judaism, Gentilism, and imposture. And Gentilism is the religion of Cain and Abel; or, if you please Shem, Ham, and Japheth, under a cloud of false and dark tradition. Some call it the religion of nature: I have no objection to that name, if they understand by it the religion of our nature in its present state of initial recovery, through Christ, from its total fall in Adam.

1. L. Wood's article, "Wesley's Epistemology" gives a thorough treatment of Wesley's understanding of the balanced role of the senses, reason, and faith in finding truth. Wesley was also optimistic about the possibility of finding pure Gospel truth if it is sought in the proper ways (1975:48).

is more difficult to define narrowly the boundaries of prevenient grace or to decide at what point prevenient grace has fulfilled its purpose.

However, Fletcher does make a few statements which seem to point to the idea that the primary task of the grace which goes before any further grace is to awaken the person to his or her need for grace (1:416-417):

> To understand this better we must remember that God's eternal nature is to "resist the proud, and give grace to the humble:" and that when free grace (which has appeared to all men) assists us, we are as free to choose humility and life, as we are to choose pride and death when we dally with temptation, or indulge the natural depravity of our own hearts.

It is hard to imagine a person convinced of his or her own self-sufficiency taking advantage of God's many offers of grace. In fact the tendency of "natural man," even in the "state of initial recovery," is to resist God's grace (Notes Rom. 1:21). So, although much of the language of Fletcher and Wesley refers to grace in terms of its power to enable obedience, an even more fundamental or primary function of grace is to convince persons of their need to make use of this empowering grace. This awareness of both need and "natural" impotence is the basis for repentance, which then opens the person to an increasing flow of grace.

This final quotation seems to summarize Fletcher's perspective on prevenient grace. Expressed in a variety of images prevenient grace is simply all that is necessary, from the Divine point of view and from the human, to enable the "natural man" to enter a saving relationship with God (1:410):

> [God] grants to all men a day of initial salvation, and "all

> that day long he stretches forth his hands" to them. He reproves them for their sins: he calls upon them in various ways to repent; and gives them the power to do it according to one or other dispensations of his grace; requiring little of those to whom he gives little; and much of those to whom much is given. (emphasis added)

Summary

We have considered Wesley's and Fletcher's views of prevenient grace in some detail and largely in their own words, realizing that it is the combination of metaphors that holds the meaning of this concept. We have noted some differences in perspective as to whether prevenient grace should be described as a specific entity, or in terms of specific personal experiences of a more general grace-flow. In either case, it is clear that Wesley and Fletcher understand prevenient grace more in terms of what it is intended to accomplish, than what it is in itself. As such, it is defined primarily by their unique soteriological presuppositions, that is, by God's revealed goal for human salvation.

From a more systematic perspective we have seen that prevenient grace is crucial to the integrity of Wesley's rigorous biblical theology, and that it is the key to holding the existential and biblical paradox of God's grace and justice in redemptive tension. It is built upon a specific christological perspective and it presupposes a very "high" view of the transcendent effects of the atonement. It also depends on an understanding of God as immanently involved in all his creation.

Practically, Rogers (1967) would still ask the question, "How does it work in real, daily experience?" So far we have only suggested its primary role in bringing persons to repentance. The purpose of the

following chapter is to provide some additional precision. However, so long as prevenient grace is defined by its goal, it will remain open to more possible interpretations than can be easily systematized. In this, the only "limiting" factor is the creativity of the Holy Spirit in leading persons within every imaginable context along the path to salvation.

Given these theological implications and presuppositions it is not surprising that prevenient grace has drawn the attention of many interpreters, coming from many perspectives. Our next task is to examine some of these various interpretations in order to gain a fuller understanding of the term, and to check our present tentative conclusions drawn from Wesley and Fletcher.

CHAPTER 3

PREVENIENT GRACE IN CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

Introduction

The history of prevenient grace's theological interpretation is extensive and diverse. One of the more imaginative attempts appeared in a 1916 edition of The Methodist Recorder (Dorr 1964:308):

> Our theological coat was cut for the figure of Total Depravity, but when it was tried on, it was found not to fit any kind of human nature. Accordingly we let out a seam in the back, as far as it would go, and the margin thus gained, with the stitches still showing, we called prevenient grace.

It is doubtful that Wesley saw himself as a theological "tailor." However, much in the analogy does seem appropriate. It affirms the tension between "scriptural" doctrine and common sense,[1] revealing the need for something "big" enough to treat human experience with integrity. It also suggests that the doctrine is somewhat less than tidy. While the usually meticulous Wesley might not have accepted this charge without debate, it seems fitting for many of his interpreters. In fact,

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1. Dorr explains (1964:309):

> Wesley, the practical theologian, used prevenient grace most frequently as the solution to a problem posed by experience and the Scriptures. His common sense and his Bible assured him that even unregenerate men have conscience and are attracted to do the good.

on the many definitions of prevenient grace now offered there seem to be quite a few "stitches showing."

Donal Dorr suggests that a better image might be found in seeing prevenient grace as a "hidden trump card which more than compensates for the incredibly bad hand dealt to man by nature" (1964:308). This works well enough if one is playing by the rules of Wesley's larger theological "point" system. But by other rules, this "trump" carries no clout. The Calvinist antagonism toward Wesley may be traceable to the inability to understand (or accept) Wesley's "rules" for the "game." As suggested before, part of the problem may lie in Wesley's use of metaphorical language and models. "Somehow Wesley was not able to translate [his] observation of experience into the language of abstract thought, coming thus to terms with predestinarian logic" (Cushman 1947:115).

Many since Wesley have tried to do this translation for him. Our task at this point is to look at some of these contemporary interpretations,[1] and let them help lead us to accurate and applicable understanding of prevenient grace consistent with the whole of Wesley's theology.

Identifying Component Aspects of Prevenient Grace

A set of several recurring themes characterize most interpretations of prevenient grace. From this fairly homogeneous root spring a

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1. The following material is drawn directly from these sources listed with full citation in the bibliography: Lee (1936); Cannon (1946); Cushman (1947); C. G. Henry (1960); Monk (1960); Williams (1960); Starkey (1962); Dorr (1964); H. Smith (1964); J. Smith (1964); Chiles (1965); Crow (1966); Rogers (1967); Lindström (1980); Harper (1983).

wide variety of branches. The different priorities and perspectives on which these basic themes are organized account for the divergent emphases and conclusions as to what prevenient grace "really" is and does. Without evaluating, we will first try to compose a wide-spectrum picture of the key components identified within prevenient grace.

Steve Harper's John Wesley's Message For Today contains a remarkably clear chapter entitled "The Power to Begin." It serves well to lay down the basic categories of prevenient grace as it is most often approached by Wesley scholars (1983:39-45). In it, he explains prevenient grace in terms of 1) who it's for -- all lost, fallen human beings; 2) when it comes -- prior to any "conscious experience of divine grace;" 3) where it leads -- "to the place of repentance;" 4) how we experience it -- creating "sensitivity to God's will," "conviction of having violated God's will," and a "first wish to please God;" 5) what difference it makes -- we are all "response-able" for our choices for or against God; because of, 6) what it gives -- the power "to exercise our wills."

Another way to outline some of the same dynamics is in terms of the three fundamental aspects of human experience native to humanity prior to the Fall: 1) consciousness, or understanding; 2) will, or desire; and 3) freedom, or "power of directing [our] own affections" (Cushman 1947:109). In fulfilling its purpose to bring fallen persons to salvation, prevenient grace addresses these capacities as they still exist in their

depraved condition.[1] Specifically how prevenient grace addresses these capacities, to what extent they are redeemed, and how such changes fit in the process of salvation are matters of widely differing opinion.

In the literature on prevenient grace these three aspects of human experience are expanded into more specific categories. Human consciousness as it relates to prevenient grace includes both self-awareness and awareness of God. This may also include some function of conscience, as one understands the implications of his or her true condition in light of God's true character. Awareness of God's will or God's law, the more general sense of right and wrong, and the recognition of God's grace can be included within this general category. In some cases, certain emotional responses may be regarded as a form of self-awareness, such as feelings of fear, dread, uneasiness, or guilt.

Desire is related directly to awareness or understanding in most cases. Seldom do we experience strong desire for or will to do something unknown. However, human will does not always function in harmony with the understanding. It is possible to know what is good and not want it. For this reason the will is treated by most interpreters as a specific human capacity in itself, without assuming that desire follows understanding.

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1. Dorr offers this helpful distinction (1964:303):

> One must distinguish between depravation and deprivation. Man [in his present, fallen condition] is not deprived of these faculties entirely . . . . [This] would in effect reduce man to the level of the inanimate. But the faculties can be depraved and corrupted without being lost completely. For Wesley man's nature is truly corrupted and polluted, and this corrupt tree can produce nothing but corrupt fruit.

The concept of freedom, or power is perhaps the most complex of all, and accounts for the widest divergence of opinion as it relates to prevenient grace. Defined as the ability to act on the basis of one's conscious desires, it incorporates and builds upon the interaction of understanding and the will. Yet it also mediates between understanding and desire to the extent that we have some control over both our thought processes -- what we focus on, believe, reject and ignore -- and our will. Clearly all human freedom is limited. Opinions on the degree and significance[1] of this limitation account for disagreements on the role of prevenient grace more than the opinions on any other aspect.

So far we have stressed the major categories of prevenient grace which relate primarily to human experience. From a more theological perspective prevenient grace is tied to the doctrines of creation, human nature, and the atonement. Ideally, each of these aspects would integrate coherently in a balanced interpretation. This would guard against an emphasis on one perspective which might strain the boundaries defined by another. However, distortions of overemphasis are hard to avoid. Such distortions always have practical as well as theological significance.

For example, some interpreters tend to stress prevenient grace as it offers continuity with God's creation purposes (Dorr 1964:310). Taken too far this approach can compromise the uniqueness and necessity of

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1. Once one rejects, as Wesley did, the doctrine of predestination questions about the nature of human freedom become significant and unavoidable.

the atonement, as well as the decisive character of regeneration implied by Wesley's strong view of human sin.

Similarly, an emphasis on prevenient grace solely in terms the explicit salvation experience could lead one to miss some of its more subtle expressions in every day life. For example, Wesley saw the basic capacity for ethical and moral reasoning to be a function of prevenient grace, thereby understanding even human laws and institutions as instruments of grace, and so giving eternal significance to one's responses to them.[1] When the gracious quality of various positive aspects of human experience are overlooked due to a fixation on the salvation "event," it can lead to semi-Pelagian prespectives on human probity, and a subtle dichotomization of sacred and secular. In contrast, Wesley seemed to visualize human experience as universally grace-infused; nothing good could be taken for granted, attributed to human virtues, or ignored for its potentially saving or, if misused, condemning influence (Notes Rom 2:4).

On the other extreme, a consuming preoccupation with the intricate processes of prevenient grace itself can bog down its dynamic, "leading," and saving potential.

John Deschner's detailed study of Wesley's christology (1988; see also Chiles 1965:145-146)) shows how Wesley's full-orbed concept of Christ functioning as prophet, priest, and king keeps his theology both balanced and rooted in orthodox foundations. Wesley saw Christ's

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1. Wesley's "toryism" is well documented (see Outlers' commentary on Sermon 111, "National Sins and Miseries" Works 3:564) and tightly integrated into his theology of providence which was at radical odds with the secularism of his day.

priestly activity in the atonement as primary, and in a sense prior to his other roles as prophet and king. Therefore all Christ's gracious prophetic effort to awaken, call, and enable persons to repentance ("while we were yet sinners") is based on his priestly purchase of "initial salvation" for all. This is then no compromise to the character of a just God whose final judgment is postponed during this "day of salvation." Neither are the "legal" demands for real holiness of heart and life made by Christ the king inconsistent with New Testament liberty. The same Christ who laid down his life is also the Christ who calls to us in our "wilderness," and "prepares the way," enabling us to become loyal subjects of his holy kingdom.

So, to be genuinely Wesleyan any interpretation of prevenient grace must be true to Wesley's balanced reading of the whole Bible, and at the same time force no compromise with human experience and common sense. Just as essential, however, is the Wesleyan priority of salvation (Rogers 1967:2-5) -- but salvation which, as we have mentioned above, Wesley interpreted with maximum breadth and depth . Although Wesley took little interest in matters that wandered too far from this primary concern, it is important to realize that, given his concept of all-inclusive grace and a lofty vision of sanctification, the theme of salvation compasses a wider portion of human experience than many evangelical perspectives today. In light of these considerations we will now look at some configurations of prevenient grace in contemporary interpretations.

Contemporary Configurations of Prevenient Grace

Charles A. Rogers' Ph.D. dissertation, "The Concept of Prevenient Grace in the Theology of John Wesley," (1967) stands out as the most comprehensive treatment of the topic available at this time.[1] He begins with a thorough survey of the major texts on Wesley's theology, then moves to focus particularly on specific studies of prevenient grace (1967:5-17). These prove to be largely unsatisfactory for various reasons as he evaluates them, first in terms of congruence with Wesley's larger theology, but most of all, in terms of how precisely each study defines the practical functions of prevenient grace in the process of salvation. We will follow a similar, though less detailed, process through some of the literature, trying to identify major trends or recurring emphases.

The first, misleading, impression of contemporary interpretations is that they are all much the same, with just a few notable exceptions. A more careful look, however, reveals some wide variations and, in some cases, plain contradictions. Some themes do consistently appear in most interpretations, but use of terminology varies, and this can lead to significantly different concepts of prevenient grace and its function in human experience.

The most consistent theme is the freedom-restoring character of prevenient grace, with only some variation as to the extent of this freedom (Rogers 1967:6). Parallel to this restored freedom is the

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1. Albert Outler recognized the significance Rogers' work in his notes on Sermon 43, "The Scripture Way of Salvation" (Works 2:157n).

heightened sense of human responsibility. These two dynamics paired make a strong case for positive human action in the direction of God, at both an internal level of desire, openness, and receptivity, and in terms of actual behavior. All of this can be subsumed under a general and ambiguous description as "God's continuing offer of the new real possibility" for persons to recover their lost relationship with God (H. Smith 1964:123). Using "possibility" terminology and speaking of a "genuinely live option of responsively turning back" communicates strong confidence in the potential of persons under prevenient grace to act proactively on their own behalf in response to God's salvation proposal (H. Smith 1964:123).

Another consistent emphasis adds to the idea of choice the dynamics of conviction of sin and the person's awareness of his or her need to repent. Yet this additional dynamic is most often subsumed within the increased freedom emphasis mentioned above. Conviction and repentance are seen as part of the motivation behind the positive choice to accept the "option" of salvation. Even when this repentance is seen as the condition for receiving more of the grace which will eventually lead a person to a decision for faith, still the emphasis is upon human choice, decision and action (H. Smith 1964:125-126):

> [M]an is the sole determinative factor in the decision for his own justification . . . to man alone is reserved (by God!) the right of decision, made possible by prevenient grace, to accept or to reject God's offer.

Rogers summarizes this general perspective, "The gift of prevenient grace is the ground of repentance and of man's ability to accept the gift of grace" (1967:10).

Another common perspective sees prevenient grace more generally

in terms of its power to mitigate the variously conceived effects of the Fall. This is the basis for Dorr's "trump card" analogy mentioned above (74). Earl P. Crow's statement represents this perspective: ". . .prevenient grace is communicated to all men for the recovery of that which they lost in the Adamic Fall" (1966:16). Others, such as Lycurgus Starkey (1962:116-123) and Harald Lindström (1980:44-50) also affirm this perspective which includes the gift of a "measure of free will" and strength to "co-operate" with God's saving work in a person's life (Rogers 1967:11-12).

Although this Fall-counteracting perspective is attractive in its inclusiveness, balance and continuity, without significant qualification it is theologically problematic in terms of Wesley's larger doctrinal commitments. Crow (1966:16) and others (C. G. Henry 1960:203; Harper 1983:39; Rogers 1967:15-16) notice that such a view of prevenient grace can easily be mistaken for a Pelagian perspective affirming the human ability to do "naturally" all the things traditionally attributed to grace. Since prevenient grace is given to every one -- and therefore could practically be considered part of every person's "natural" endowment -- the distinction between nature and grace becomes mainly theoretical. One might conclude that regardless of how it happens to be from God's perspective, all human beings have the capacity to make choices for God that can lead them to salvation. Thus human fallenness is reduced to a theological abstraction, which, due to the universal restorative effects of prevenient grace, has very little practical significance.

Clearly, this raises some questions. Wesley's doctrine of the Fall seems stronger than this concept of prevenient grace would imply. Or,

put another way, Wesley did not interpret prevenient grace alone as being quite so triumphant over the Fall. Human fallenness needed more than prevenient grace to be reversed; persons do not simply start off "even" or neutral with regard to sin. Part of the difficulty here lies in a lack of precision in identifying the specific role of prevenient grace in the order of salvation.

As we saw in Wesley's sermon on "Working Out Your Own Salvation" (Works 3:199), prevenient grace has two aspects corresponding to the "two grand branches" of salvation. Usually prevenient grace is used to describe the grace that comes before justification. However, there is another sense in which it functions <u>after</u> the decisive infusion of saving grace at justification, but <u>before</u> and leading to sanctification. This is what Rogers (1967:290) summarized as "the power and possibility for man's involvement in the process of sanctification." This dual function of prevenient grace has caused some of the differences of opinion among interpreters. In some, one can sense a kind of merger of the two "branches" into one general influence for Godliness, as in the case of those mentioned above which resemble a Pelagian concept. Others, such as J. Weldon Smith (1964:79-80) and Umphrey Lee (1936:125-126) tend to focus exclusively on the power of prevenient grace, experienced <u>after</u> saving faith has been exercised, leading only to sanctification. They affirm that the way a person comes first to saving faith is not the concern of prevenient grace: "Imputed [prevenient] grace in no way leads to faith" (J. W. Smith 1964:80). Prevenient grace is activated after faith in order to lead the believer to maturity.

Which of these three widely differing perspectives is true to

Wesley? Does prevenient grace 1) precede justification, 2) follow justification, but precede sanctification, or 3) simply energize the whole process of moving people toward general improvement in godliness? Rogers addresses this sticky issue by taking a biographical approach in his detailed historical study of the transition between "early Wesley" before his conversion, and "late Wesley" (1967:145).

The major difference in Wesley after his conversion was in his new emphasis upon the necessity of justification before persons can go on to sanctification, even though they are assisted by prevenient grace. Rogers explains (1967:204-205):

> The early Wesley viewed prevenient grace as a gift bestowed upon man at the time of his regeneration in baptism which, together with the continual assisting grace of the Spirit, gave him the power to do the works of sanctification and thus progress toward the goal of salvation or acceptance with God . . . . In the later Wesley the soteriological formula is quite different, as is the role of prevenient grace . . . . Prevenient grace is not the grace received at baptism, but is the universal gift to man in consequence of the atonement. Its first soteriological role is in relation not to man's sanctification, but to his justification. (emphasis added)

This shift relates to Wesley's change in his estimate of the power of sin, and the limitations of even grace-assisted human determination to conquer it (Rogers 1967:145). It is also tied to the painful change in Wesley's understanding of "saving faith" that began while he was in Georgia and culminated in his conversion experience back in London (Rogers 1967:77-88; see also Works 18:242-250). These biographical considerations will be considered in more detail in a following section.

The last interpretation to be considered is a minority perspective. However, it seems to offer an understanding of prevenient grace more

consistent with the major transitions in Wesley's spiritual and theological journey highlighted by Rogers' study. Offered by Robert E. Cushman in a definitive essay, "Salvation For All," in 1947 (early in the flow of contemporary Wesleyan scholarship), it is nevertheless seldom quoted in other later work. Rogers describes Cushman as "significantly different" from the others he surveys. But at the conclusion of his detailed analysis Rogers shows strong support for Cushman's perspective (1967:271, 283, 287-290).

Like the others, Cushman affirms the universality of prevenient grace and its necessity for meaningful contact between God and fallen humanity: "[T]he 'natural man' [i.e., man without grace] is for Wesley a fictional abstraction" (Cushman 1947:108). Yet Cushman attaches a slightly different meaning to the universality of prevenient grace. For him it is essential, not just for salvation, but also for meaningful rebellion against God. Aside from prevenient grace it would not be possible for persons to sin (defining sin fundamentally as resistance to grace), nor for them to know that they had sinned (110). Prevenient grace creates a "continuity between God and man, <u>from God's side</u>" (109), but it is a continuity characterized by the tension between "the drawings of the Father (prevenient grace) and man's rebellious introversion" (111). Cushman defines justifying grace as "prevenient grace becoming triumphant" (111). However, this triumph is far from inevitable. The dominant human response is to resist and often ultimately to defeat the efforts of grace.

The distinctiveness of Cushman's position from those mentioned above begins to show when he affirms that prevenient grace does not

"diminish man's corruption of the will, but rather exhibits it in its depravity" (111). The effects of the Fall are not diluted, but exposed in the worst possible light. "It is not that man has not grace and, therefore, is corrupt (Calvinism). It is that despite grace, he continues to rebel" (111). This suggests that a fallen person without any grace at all (if such can be imagined) is in a "better" condition from God's perspective than the "natural man" described by Wesley "who by resisting the light that he has, succeeds in virtually quenching the spirit" (113; see Works 3:207).

The primary purpose of prevenient grace is to give persons self-awareness, to show them that in spite of God's grace and the theoretical possibility of obeying it, they habitually choose not to obey and find themselves powerless to change (Cushman 1947:113):

> This man, by the light which enlightens him, recognizes the contradiction between his will and a good of which he is aware but cannot willingly affirm. He is the man who is in degree disquieted by his sin but cannot conquer it.

Rather than empowering persons to make positive changes to relieve the tension of this conflict, prevenient grace serves to increase it, leading to a sense of despair. Cushman sees this despair as the best gift of prevenient grace, "the ground of hope, for it unsettles man in his self-reliance." The goal of this unsettling is to bring the person to a crucial transition point, "that zero-point of the will whence comes the imperceptible transition from man's futile working to God's working" (113).

Rogers agrees with Cushman's assessment of "man's futile working," even given the empowering reality of prevenient grace. "Man cannot justify or sanctify himself, either by a natural or by a gracious-

ly restored measure of freedom" (1967:290). Cushman supplies the reason (115):

> A will bent upon self-assertion, attempting to affirm God, only affirms itself. Every effort to goodness stumbles upon self-contradiction. The will must die subsiding in the despair of exhaustion.

As bleak as this seems, it is the ground of a new beginning. "Thus our despair is our healing; for it is then that we 'go out of ourselves, in order to be swallowed up in him; when we sink into nothing, that he may be all in all'" (Cushman 1947:114).

These several general perspectives on prevenient grace each have a certain appeal, however they are all significantly different and would be difficult to combine into a whole definition. Clarity demands some evaluation and selectivity. In the following section we will consider the priorities that should inform such a process as we move toward formulating our own working definition.

Priorities For Evaluation

We have repeatedly emphasized the priority of salvation in Wesley's theology and life. To properly understand prevenient grace as a part of his theology would require a thorough study of Wesley's soteriology. This is beyond the scope of the present study. Rather than duplicating much of the available research, we will rely on Rogers and a few illustrative passages from Wesley to sketch the basic outline needed to clarify prevenient grace.

We have noted the fact that Rogers concludes in agreement with Cushman's perspective on prevenient grace. The quality (and quantity)

of Rogers' research is persuasive in itself, however some further substantiation may add further credibility and clarity.

There are few people in the Methodist tradition who do not recognize May 24, 1738 as the turning point in Wesley's life and the beginning of the Methodist revival. Therefore, Rogers' distinction between the early and later Wesleyan theology stands well supported. It was at this point that Wesley's repentance and saving faith took on new and decisive meaning for his doctrine of salvation. To this point Wesley's own struggle with assurance (Works 18:242-250) had led him to realize the possibility of a depth of faith he had not yet experienced. This new understanding of faith as deep, experiential trust in the atoning work of Christ to meet his own desperate need for forgiveness and sin-conquering power was a quantum leap above Wesley's previous intellectual assent to and hope in the gospel story.

In order to experience this faith, Wesley had to come to terms with the limitations of his baptismal regeneration and the grace which he counted on to lead him into sanctification. This despair-producing process came to a head in the latter days of his time in Georgia and on his return to London (Rogers 1967:83-89). It was what prepared Wesley for the rather unexpected and "strange" arrival of saving faith while he attended the Aldersgate meeting -- a meeting to which he had "very unwillingly" gone (Works 18:249). The picture of Wesley's "heart-warming" experience is not one of a man actively choosing to accept the offer of faith. On the contrary Wesley almost seemed surprised by what happened (Works 18:250).

Such a reading of Wesley's own spiritual biography supports

Cushman's interpretation of prevenient grace. Wesley realized that the salvation he saw in Scripture and craved in his own experience presupposes an empowerment of the person far beyond the limitations of his fallen nature plus prevenient grace. This empowerment came for Wesley with the cleansing of justification through saving faith. Yet, this faith was a gift in itself and could not be created either by rational assent to scriptural doctrines or rigorous attention to spiritual disciplines. It came only after many attempts and failures on Wesley's part to achieve it by force of his will. Into a thoroughly repentant, despairing soul it came unexpectedly. A later hymn describes the contradictory, not cooperative, dynamics of human effort and divine grace (Works 7:232):

> Too strong I was to conquer sin
> When 'gainst it first I turned my face,
> Nor knew my want of power within,
> Nor knew th'omnipotence of grace.
>
> In nature's strength I fought in vain
> For what my God refused to give;
> I could not then the mastery gain
> Or lord of all my passions live.
> . . . . . .
>
> Because I now can nothing do,
> Jesus, do all the work alone,
> And bring my soul triumphant through,
> To wave its palm before thy throne.

This theme of heart-felt repentance preceding saving faith was not unique to Wesley's experience. Fletcher's spiritual pilgrimage was almost a mirror image of Wesley's (Baker 1960:292-293). Also the experiences of many people within the subsequent Methodist revival followed a similar course. Of the many possible examples, here is one taken from Wesley's journal (Curnock, Journal 2:278-279):

> I preached again at Plaistow on "Blessed are those who mourn." It pleased God to give us in that hour two living instances of that piercing sense of both guilt and the power of sin, that dread of the wrath of God, and conviction of man's inability either to remove the power or atone for the guilt of sin (called by the world, despair); in which properly consists poverty of spirit and mourning, which are the gate of Christian blessedness.

Wesley believed that only desperate people are in a position to receive saving faith. Because of his glorious vision of what lay on the other side of repentant despair, he did not hesitate to encourage it within his hearers. This clarifies the rationale behind his concept of "works of repentance" or the "ordinances" which earned him so much misunderstanding and condemnation (Rogers 1967:270-271). Speaking from Scripture, Wesley made heavy demands upon those who claimed to be seeking God (Works 9:69-73). A natural, but mistaken inference from these "rules" was that Wesley was advocating some form of salvation by works. In reality he regarded these works as necessary only in that they were "the ordinary or usual means appointed by God" to prepare the heart for faith, which remained only and always a gift of grace.

Rogers ties this to the function of prevenient grace (1967:271):

> All man's works done before faith are sinful. The prevenient grace of Christ, however, restores to man the freedom and ability to choose or refuse obedience to the ordinances. Through obedience man may be brought to increased conviction of sin and finally to that <u>despair of self</u> which is <u>requisite for faith</u>. (emphasis added)

This then is the intended function of prevenient grace in restoring a "measure of freedom" to fallen persons. This freedom does <u>not</u> give them the ability to fulfill God's will, nor actively to choose to take an offered gift of faith, nor even to use repentance to bring them to the point of choosing for salvation. Pro-active human participation in the

moment of saving faith is an interpretation which Wesley seemed unwilling to accept. Instead he believed prevenient grace offers seekers the live option of participating in a "curriculum" of desire, trial and failure until in desperation they are prepared to receive -- not choose or accept -- saving faith as a gift. This is the crucial difference between Cushman and the other perspectives.

In summary, Wesley saw the atonement as the "initial act in the process of justification" (Rogers 1967:287) and the ground of prevenient grace. Prevenient grace in all its activities is necessary to bring fallen persons to the awareness of their need which would enable them to receive the gift of saving faith. To borrow a metaphor from Fletcher (1:37), prevenient grace is what awakens a sin-crippled spiritual beggar to fact of his poverty such that he holds out his hand, not passively, but in the desperate conviction that his life depends on outside help alone. This is clearly not any form of empowerment for self-improvement or works righteousness. With the gift of faith, coming as it will when the human heart is truly receptive, comes the empowerment to work with God in "the gradual cleansing of man's heart and life, and increasing his faith until he receives finally the gift of sanctifying faith" (Rogers 1967:290). The Wesley's put it to music thus (Works 7:238):

> Lord, I despair myself to heal;
> I see my sin, but cannot feel;
> I cannot, till thy Spirit blow,
> And bid th'obedient waters flow.
>
> 'Tis thine a heart of flesh to give;
> Thy gifts I only can receive;
> Here then to thee I all resign,
> To draw, redeem, and seal is thine.

Prevenient Grace: A Working Definition

Our conclusions about prevenient grace need not be lengthy, detailed nor as artistically expressed as in the metaphors of Wesley and Fletcher. But they must be consistent with them. Whatever the particular formulation of prevenient grace, within whatever model, it is always: 1) the completely unmerited activity of God on the basis of Christ's atonement alone, 2) reaching out universally to persons blinded and paralyzed by the effects of sin, 3) providing for all an initial salvation from the effects of the Fall, for which they bear no personal responsibility, 4) giving all persons some awareness of their inadequacy, guilt, and prideful resistence toward God and his previous overtures of grace, 5) providing the freedom/power to respond positively to subsequent directions from God, 6) for the purpose of preparing them for the gift of faith and a fully saving relationship with God here and now.

Although Wesley affirmed predictable patterns of divine-human interaction, he realized that prevenient grace functions with infinite creativity. It's principal purpose is to remove every barrier that stands in the way of the initiation and completion of God's redemptive purposes. The primary, fundamental barrier is human pride and the lies of self-sufficiency in all their forms, which exclude and defy saving faith.

Prevenient grace is best recognized in hindsight, particularly after it has accomplished its purpose in the great "unveiling" of spiritual eyes which accompanies saving faith (Chiles 1965:154). However, in

spite of the fact that it is often difficult to recognize grace, to the extent that one is being drawn out of the false security of self-righteousness and into an insatiable, growing hunger and desperate dependency upon Someone greater than oneself, this is strong evidence of the present activity of prevenient grace.

Summary

These first three chapters have attempted to provide a thorough look at the doctrine of prevenient grace as Wesley understood and preached it. We have acknowledged many of the difficulties in abstracting a theoretical definition from Wesley's language which drew heavily upon biblical imagery and employed a variety of metaphors. For assistance we considered Fletcher's interpretations of Wesley. Although they shed light on what Wesley believed, these too presented similar challenges to analytical interpretation. This third chapter was an attempt to select from among the variety of contemporary interpretations of prevenient grace. The goal was to build a working definition that was logically and theologically consistent, and which rang true against the words and images of Wesley and Fletcher.

Continuing the search for clarity as to the meaning and significance of prevenient grace in Wesley's thought, we now turn to examine in part two its practical expressions in the Methodist revival. In keeping with the missiological focus of this study, we will look particularly at the impact Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace had upon early Methodist missions.

PART II

PREVENIENT GRACE IN EARLY METHODIST MISSIONS

CHAPTER 4

WESLEY'S WORLD VISION

Introduction

Part one proposed a working definition of prevenient grace, drawn from the writings of John Wesley, John Fletcher, and a selection of contemporary scholarly interpretations. Part two will look at the practical impact of this doctrine on the priorities and patterns of early Methodist missions. In Wesley studies it is always valid, if not compulsory, to ask practical questions. Wesley was known for both his pragmatism and his passion for congruence between doctrine and life.[1] For this reason, one must suspect any conviction credited to Wesley that cannot be validated by his actions.

This congruence of doctrine and practice structures and supports the goals of the following historical overview. They are: 1) to evaluate the working definition of prevenient grace proposed in part one in light of the global ministry applications of Wesley and his closest mis-

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1. This theme runs throughout Wesley's writings. His essay, Character of a Methodist (Works 9:35) and sermon, "The Almost Christian" (Works 1:131) are representative.

sionary colleagues; 2) to assess its working significance for ministry in the "world parish" -- was it as crucial to practice as it was to theological debate? -- and, 3) to identify the distinctive and normative marks of prevenient grace in missionary application.

Methodology

The phrase "early Methodist missions" immediately raises three questions.[1] First, what is meant by "missions"? How are mission concerns and activities different from other aspects of ministry? Second, aside from the Wesleys, who were the "Methodists"? During the earlier days of the revival, affiliation was fairly flexible. Yet any connection with the movement often left one labeled a "Methodist" for life.[2] Third,

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1. Stackhouse points out the fact that "contexts do not define themselves" (1988:12). Therefore any such designation requires some justification.

2. In its formation, the Methodist revival went through many changes, and some fundamental divisions. This has caused confusion for history writers who sometimes claim other eighteenth-century evangelicals as "Methodists." For example, Warren A. Candler described Henry Venn as "a Methodist preacher" (1904:148). This is no doubt due to Venn's early association with George Whitefield and Lady Huntingdon's chaplains, prior to their split from Wesley following the 1770 Minutes controversy. Wesley himself explained how Venn and others, by "preaching salvation by faith, and endeavoring to live accordingly, to be Bible-Christians, were soon included in the general name of Methodists" (Works 9:370). However, Venn's grandson, and namesake, tried to clear him of any such Methodist association through the editing and publication of The Life and a Selection From the Letters of the Late Rev. Henry Venn, M. A. In the preface he makes an effort to demonstrate that Henry Venn's evangelical awakening may have paralleled much of what Wesley and Whitefield experienced, but it was in no way dependent upon them (1834:ix-xi). A letter from Venn to his daughter in 1789 more pointedly defines his later doctrinal departure from Wesley and the core Methodist movement (Venn 1834:467):

> I am not sorry you have heard Mr. Wesley -- a very extraor-

what defines "early"? What are primary considerations for such historical divisions?

Several priorities will determine the present journey through the literature addressing these and other questions. First priority will be given to primary sources, coming directly from the early missionary efforts of the Methodist revival. Although this is a limited collection some selectivity is still necessary. Among these primary sources Wesley's own writings take precedence. The work of others within the revival have been chosen on the basis of their historical and personal contact with Wesley, their clear doctrinal agreement with him, and the distinctive "missionary" character of their ministry.

Along with this primary material, a fresh study of early Methodism's historical and socioeconomic context would be desirable. However, the limits of this study force reliance upon secondary sources.

Within these guidelines, the task of chapter four is to examine Wesley's own vision for the evangelization of the world. What was the theology behind his idea of a "world parish" that underlay both the message and the forms of Methodism? To answer this requires an analysis of Wesley's later sermon, "The General Spread of the Gospel"

Continued.

> dinary man, but not to be believed in his assertions about perfection . . . . How much more good would Mr. Wesley have done, had he not drunk in this error! as there are, doubtless, many very excellent Christians amongst his people; -- but the best are sadly harassed by this false doctrine.

For more information on Venn and the Anglican evangelicals, see Shenk (1977:16), and Lady Huntingdon and Her Friends (H. Knight 1853:289).

(Works 2:485) as it outlines his vision for the worldwide triumph of the gospel in more specific, practical terms. This document could be called the missionary manifesto of Methodism. Writing in 1783, Wesley speaks from nearly forty-five years' reflection on the Methodist revival as he looks to the future. In it he describes the global implications of prevenient grace leading to the complete fulfillment of God's salvation purposes for the whole world.

Contrasting Wesley's glorious vision with the history of Methodism over the last two hundred years raises some questions about the validity of his principles. Considering these questions, invites a brief look at some key contextual issues of the Wesleyan revival's later years. Following the first Methodist mission impulses born of Wesley's vision, there is evidence of a significant transition in climate of British evangelicalism; a shift which had a significant impact on both the theology and methodology of missions. This occurred within the first generation after Wesley's death and quickly seemed to draw Methodist missions into the evangelical mainstream to the degree that one may wonder if any of subsequent missionary efforts were undertaken in a truly Wesleyan mode. This will be considered in more detail in chapter five. For now, it forms part of the hypothesis which focuses attention particularly on the generation immediately following Wesley's death.

The trajectory of Methodist missions during the years immediately following 1783 seems to align with much of Wesley's vision for the revival's global expansion. To illustrate this, chapters six, seven, and eight will focus on the efforts and writings of Methodist missionaries

Thomas Coke, Melville Horne, and Joshua Marsden.[1] Although this is a narrow selection, each of these early missionaries bear the marks of a "world parish" orientation and a motivating confidence in the universal effects of prevenient grace. They also develop from these some key methodological implications for missionary practice.

Of the three, Joshua Marsden actually did the most mission work. Coke was for years an evangelist and Methodism's missionary catalyst, but he died before reaching his own mission appointment in India. Horne, turned back prematurely from his mission to Sierra Leone by sickness, became a vigorous mission advocate, authored one of the first missiological "textbooks," and later helped found the London Missionary Society. From the collage of their lives and writings we will try to extract and clarify the evidence of the doctrine of prevenient grace in missionary action.

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1. Francis Asbury may seem conspicuously absent from this list. Unquestionably his work in overseeing the Methodist circuits on the American frontier was "missionary" in character and in harmony with Wesley's vision of the gospel's "general spread" (Doraisamy 1983:43-46; Baker 1976:139). However, several factors account for his omission from this study:

1) Asbury was focused on spreading the revival specifically in America. In this he mirrored Wesley's focused concern for Britain (Vickers 1969:131). Coke, Horne, and Marsden in contrast seemed driven by a more global vision in both their ministries and writings.

2) The cultural and genetic continuity between the American settlers and England complicates the contemporary understanding of "missions" in terms of crossing frontiers.

3) We recognize that theologically speaking the only significant frontiers are defined by one's relationship with God. Practically, however, there are real differences between the expansion of a growing indigenous church and the initial efforts to extend the revival into new areas.

Summary

This overview maps our general course through a segment of early Methodist mission history. Unfortunately, this study cannot offer a comprehensive treatment of early Methodist missions. Its goal is only to enhance our theoretical understanding of prevenient grace, by looking at its early expression in missions. At the end we should have a clearer understanding of what the doctrine of prevenient grace meant to the Methodist revival, how significant it actually was for early missionary methods, and some of its distinctive marks wherever it was a priority. But before moving into this study it is important to remember a key point from chapter one. Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace is meaningful only when it is integrated with both its roots in the powerful, objective reality of Christ's atonement, and its goal of full, experiential human salvation.

Wesley's World Vision

The World Parish

Shortly after Wesley's Aldersgate conversion, May 24, 1738, he made his famous declaration, "I look upon all the world as my parish" (Curnock, Journal 2:218). Of course, this referred specifically to his recent expulsion from many Church of England pulpits, and his difficult decision to preach in the open fields around Bristol (A. Wood 1967:83-93). Yet it was also an integral expression of Wesley's fundamental theology and indicative of his global vision. His understanding of a universal gospel, designed to meet a universal human need, coupled with his sense of a distinct call to preach, drove him beyond the tradi-

tional patterns of Anglican ministry.

Field preaching in "Christian" England[1] was the first practical expression of Wesley's revived evangelical theology, as well as the "turning point in the career of Wesley and the Methodist movement" (Doraisamy 1983:20).[2] It was also the first truly indigenous form taken by the Methodist movement in response to the increasingly industrialized and class-segregated English social context (A. Wood 1967:98).

This idea of a "world parish" was not a popular position for Wesley to take against the more parochial ideas and structures of his church (Doraisamy 1983:25). Yet Wesley was sure of his scriptural authority to act as he did (Works 25:692). Defending himself in a letter to his friend and former student, James Hervey, October 25, 1739, Wesley explained (Works 25:693):

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1. Martin Schmidt explains how Wesley came to see the idea of a "Christian England" as "an illusion" (1972:193-194):

> The name of "Christian," resting on the guarantee of a purely institutional national Church, was for him no Christianity at all. He was the first to recognize clearly in the modern age that the task of Christianity in the world is mission, and to draw immediate practical deductions from this.

2. Wesley's journal reveals his reluctance to violate personal as well as Anglican propriety. His field preaching was not born of any natural instinct for enthusiastic showmanship (Curnock, Journal 4:325):

> What marvel the devil does not love field preaching! Neither do I: I love a commodious room, a soft cushion, a handsome pulpit. But where is my zeal, if I do not trample all these underfoot in order to save one more soul?

Over thirty years later Wesley still confessed, "To this day field preaching is a cross to me. But I know my commission and see no other way of preaching the gospel to every creature" (Curnock, Journal 5:484).

> A dispensation of the gospel is committed to me, and woe is me if I preach not the gospel . . . .
>
> . . . . . .
>
> [I]t comes to a short issue. I everywhere see God's people perishing for lack of knowledge. I have power (through God) to save their souls from death. Shall I use it, or shall I let them perish -- 'because they are not of my parish'?

As we will see later in more detail, Wesley's theology of ministry was driven by 1) his understanding of human need, 2) his confidence in the possibility of universal full salvation,[1] and 3) his deep awareness of his call and ordination to preach the gospel.[2] The universality of human need made the distinction between parish and non-parish irrelevant to Wesley.[3] So it also altered the meaning of "missions" as a separate form of ministry within the church. Martin Schmidt draws the following connection (1972:30):

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1. In an earlier letter to James Hervey, Wesley had affirmed his belief in the possibility of salvation from the power of sin, by faith (Works 25:609-610):

> [H]ow far I believe that the privilege of children of God, the not committing sin, to extend, you have probably seen in my printed Sermon on Salvation by Faith . . . Ask and you shall receive this, and sin shall no more have dominion over you, and you shall have sweet peace in the blood of Jesus . . . .

2. "A Christian is always on active service. Wesley always believed that ordination did not bind a person to one place or to a particular congregation, but that it was essentially universal. It was basically mission" (Schmidt 1972:145).

3. "In view of this radical obligation ["Woe is me, if I preach not the gospel"], what is to be said about the tidy divisions of the world's inhabitants . . . into distinct ecclesiastical units" (Schmidt 1972:29-30)?

". . . Wesley rescued the term 'parish' from its parochial limits and limitations, claiming freedom to preach under the call of God" (Doraisamy 1983:25).

> The congregation was a mission-field and the mission-congregation, because the situation of the "old man" before acceptance of the gospel-message was in no way different from that of the heathen; both stood in need of the same new birth.

For Wesley, Christ's offer of the possibility of "new birth" to all persons, and his call to proclaim the good news, radically changed the essential categories of human experience and ministry. Focusing on shared needs and opportunities of all persons and the universal scope of God's call to preach the gospel, opened the church the whole world.[1]

At the outset it has been essential to clarify the meaning of Wesley's "world parish" declaration. Although it has strong appeal as a missionary slogan,[2] to see it in a primarily foreign mission orientation is a profound misunderstanding. In fact Wesley was pointing to the practical, structural holism of three essential scriptural facts: 1) every person's need for "new birth", 2) Christ's provision of universal and full salvation, and 3) his (and every Christian's) unlimited call from God to preach this gospel. Methodist bishop, Theodore Doraisamy regrets the fact that this key concept for Wesley's whole approach to ministry has been so taken out of context (1983:26):

> In light of the cumulative emphasis on the foreign missions aspect of Wesley's "world parish," the holistic meaning is likely to be confined to academic work. Only by the combination of the terms "home" or "domestic" missions and "foreign" missions, together with the social implications of

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1. "No more was it possible in theory to make the parish one's world" (Doraisamy 1983:26).

2. George Whitefield quoted Wesley's words as he left on his mission to the American colonies in 1739 (Curnock, Journal 2:218n). Theodore Doraisamy points to this as the first of many such popular applications of the phrase strictly in terms of foreign missions (1983:26).

the Gospel can the wholeness of the concept be kept intact.

Clearly Wesley was not building a case against foreign missions.[1] The "world parish" concept was rather intended to call the church to its true evangelical "mission" within its own walls, within its own nation, and wherever and with whomever it engages in ministry.[2]

This fundamental unity between "church" and "mission", "home" and "foreign" ministry is the key to understanding Wesley's concept of mission primarily in terms of the "spread" vs. the "leap" of the Gospel. As we will see, Wesley visualized mission as a movement of "expansion growth" (Hunter 1987:32). With the gospel preachers, the primary agents of mission would be the witness of person to person, and subsequent inclusion of neighbors within groups of fellow seekers. His concern was not just claiming, but also keeping all the world for Christ. In this Wesley combined both evangelical and pastoral priorities. Neither could be neglected if the revival was to finish its course.[3]

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1. "The recognition of universal grace given to all mankind make the missional offer of salvation an imperative" (Doraisamy 1983:22).

2. Keith Bridston's Mission, Myth and Reality expresses Wesley's perspective clearly (1965:39-40):

> The geographical frontier can have meaning and evocative power for missionary obedience if it is understood as a symbol of the total mission of one church to the world. The present task is to draw the implications of the symbol in such a way that the whole church, wherever it is locally manifested, becomes aware that it has the missionary task of carrying the gospel to any and all frontiers . . . Wherever the Church meets the world, there is the missionary frontier.

3. "The parish is a mission-field and the mission-field is a parish" (Schmidt 1972:131)

"The General Spread of the Gospel"[1]

Forty-four years of vigorous ministry and phenomenal results separate Wesley's "world parish" declaration from this sermon, composed when he was eighty years old. Appropriately it was written while Wesley was preaching in Dublin, Ireland, instead of in his native England. But by then the revival had spread much farther than Ireland.

There were in 1783 strong Methodist societies in Wales, and continuing mission efforts in Scotland (Rogal:1988). A wealthy planter from the West Indies had been converted under Wesley's preaching while visiting in England, and returned home to start a thriving Society in Antigua in 1760 (Walker 1933:28-29). German-Irish Methodist laymen and British soldiers had already exported the revival to America at about the same time (Candler 1904:103, 153). Now under the care of Francis Asbury, it was spreading across the colonial frontier with the settlers (Barclay 1949:100-104, 121ff). Wesley was within a few months of ordaining Thomas Coke to help superintend the growing new Methodist church in the United States (Thompson 1957:7-13).

Meanwhile, Coke was burning with a plan of his own for more actively extending Methodism's influence world-wide (Vickers 1969:133). Within the decade Melville Horne would sail for Sierra Leone (Horne 1815:v-xvi). Soon after, a young Joshua Marsden would return from sea, find saving faith among the Methodists, and set out for Nova Scotia on his first mission under Coke's ordination (Marsden 1816:iii-8).

In light of the circumstances Wesley seemed justified in his

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1. The title of one of Wesley's key sermons (Works 2:248).

enthusiasm as he described what he saw to be the imminent worldwide revival of "scriptural Christianity." Even though his sermon begins with a bleak picture of the world's condition,[1] "Wesley's hopes for the universal redemption of even such a world remain as high as ever" (Works 2:485). Not only was Wesley encouraged by the general trajectory of the Methodist revival, he saw the revival itself as "a model of God's final design" for the world's salvation (Works 2:485). In the face of doom-sayers, Wesley remained dauntless (Works 2:493):

> That he [God] will carry it on I cannot doubt; however Luther may affirm that a revival of religion never lasts above a generation . . . or however prophets of evil may say, "All will be at an end when the first instruments are removed". . . I cannot induce myself to think that God has wrought so glorious a work to let it sink and die away in a few years. No; I trust this is only the beginning of a far greater work -- the dawn of "the latter day glory." (emphasis added)

For Wesley there was no better answer to the haunting questions of a loving God in the face of an evil world than the affirmation that it will not always be this way. Soon God was going to remedy the situation. "All unprejudiced persons may see with their eyes that he is already renewing the face of the earth" (Works 2:499). How could he hope this would happen?

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1. Wesley begins his sermon with the exclamation, "How does darkness, intellectual darkness, ignorance, with vice and misery attendant upon it cover the face of the earth!" This is followed by a quotation from an early version of a world survey of "unreached peoples": Dividing the world into thirty parts, he estimates that nineteen out of thirty are "heathen, altogether as ignorant of Christ as if he had never come into the world." Another six of the thirty are "Mahometans. . . how far and wide has this miserable delusion spread over the face of the earth." The remaining five out of thirty are "nominally Christians." Of these he asks, "what manner of Christians are they? Are they 'holy as he that called them is holy'? . . . Do they 'walk as Christ also walked'? Nay, they are as far from it as hell is from heaven" (Works 2:485-488).

Wesley begins by admitting that indeed it is impossible for God to fulfill the promises of Scripture regarding the salvation of the world, unless he takes one of two tracks. The first would be to act irresistibly. By the same power with which he created the world he could save the world. But the consequence of this option disqualifies it, for "then man would be man no longer . . . . He would no longer be a moral agent, any more than the sun or the wind . . . . Consequently he would be no longer capable of virtue or vice, of reward or punishment" (Works 2:488-489). With a naked barb toward the Calvinists, Wesley rejects this "clumsy way of cutting the knot we are unable to untie."

The second alternative is based on the continuity of God's salvation history (Works 2:489):

> As God is one, so the work of God is uniform in all ages. May we not then conceive how he <u>will</u> work on the souls of men in times to come by considering how he <u>does</u> work <u>now</u>? And how he <u>has</u> wrought in times past.

Wesley very simply appeals to Christians to look at their own salvation experience. He then asks whether or not it is possible for God to do a similar work, by similar means, in others. Highlighting the way that God works <u>through</u> human "understanding," "affections" and "liberty," he asks, could not God's "assisting" grace accomplish the same thing on a worldwide scale? Then with remarkable boldness Wesley affirms, "It is as easy for him to convert a world as one individual soul." [1]

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1. Wesley elaborates (Works 2:489):

> Just so he has <u>assisted</u> five in one house to make that happy <u>choice</u>, fifty or five hundred in one city, and many thousands in a nation, without depriving any of them of

Having laid the foundation of his argument from salvation history, Wesley moves to summarize the history of the Methodist revival, beginning with the Oxford Holy Club.[1] Wesley describes how the "leaven"[2] spread from Oxford throughout England, into Scotland and Ireland. From there, he traces its path to "New York, Pennsylvania, and many other provinces in America, even as high as Newfoundland and Nova Scotia." He might also have included the significant work in the West Indies as well.

Wesley believed that just as individual experiences of grace have consistently distinctive characteristics, so the corporate expressions of the revival were somewhat uniform. It usually began with "violent and tempestuous power," following the public proclamation of the gos-

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. .Continued. .

> that liberty which is essential to a moral agent.

Wesley makes allowance for the rare instances in which God seems to work irresistibly, but such work is only temporary. "I am persuaded there are no men living that have not many times 'resisted the Holy Ghost'." He concludes by quoting St. Augustine: "he that made us without ourselves will not save us without ourselves" (Works 2:490).

1. Wesley recalls (Works 2:490):

> Between fifty and sixty years ago God raised up a few young men in the University of Oxford to testify those grand truths which were then little attended to: That without holiness no man shall see the Lord; That this holiness is the work of God, who worketh in us both to will and to do . . . .

2. Wesley describes the characteristics of this "leaven" in human experience (Works 2:491):

> More and more saw the truth as it is in Jesus, and received it in the love thereof. More and more 'found redemption through the blood of Jesus, even the forgiveness of sins'. They were born again of his Spirit, and filled with righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

pel.[1] This continued for several weeks at an intense pitch, then gradually subsided. "The work of God was [then] carried on by gentle degrees; while that Spirit, water[ed] the seed that had been sown, confirming and strengthening them that had believed" (Works 2:491-492). This was the general pattern of the revival so far as Methodism had spread to that point.[2]

Wesley visualized the revival growing gradually and spreading "from heart to heart, from house to house, from town to town, from one kingdom to another." He also visualized a very specific geographical trend, based on the varying degrees of receptivity to the gospel and the proximity of nations to the revival "carriers." In line with what was already happening in America, Wesley predicted the continuation of the revival throughout all of "the isles of North America." Simultaneously he saw potential for an expansion into Holland, where there was already a "blessed work in Utrecht." From Holland, the revival would probably move into France, Germany and Switzerland, primarily among the Protestant population. Then it would continue into Scandinavia, Russia, "and all other Protestant nations in Europe" (Works 2:493).

Following the revived Protestants, the Roman Catholics would taste "experimental knowledge and love of God, inward and outward holiness."

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1. For more information on the dramatic effect of Wesley's preaching, see Holland (1973).

2. It is interesting to note that while Wesley acknowledges the place of the powerful, torrential dynamics of the revival, he does not see this as its most significant aspect. "But in general it seems the kingdom of God will not 'come with observation', but will silently increase wherever it is set up . . ." (Works 2:493).

The catalyst would be their direct contact with "holy" Protestants in those "countries where Romanists and Protestants live intermixed and familiarly converse with each other." From here Wesley summarizes that it will not be hard for God "to make a way for religion, in the life and power thereof" into the rest of the predominantly Roman Catholic nations. Likewise, God will move into all the remotest parts of Asia, Africa, and Europe (Works 2:493).

Wesley not only predicts the direction of geographical flow, he is confident there is a biblical pattern for socioeconomic factors as well. "God will observe the same order which he hath done from the beginning of Christianity. 'They shall know me,' saith the Lord, not from the greatest to the least (this is the wisdom of the world which is foolishness with God) but 'from the least to the greatest,' that the praise may not be of men but of God." As if to affirm the impossible, Wesley says (Works 2:493-494):

> Before the end even the rich shall enter the kingdom of God. Together with them will enter in the great, the noble, the honourable; yea, the rulers, the princes, the kings of the earth. Last of all the wise and the learned, the men of genius, the philosophers, will be convinced that they are fools; will "be converted and become as little children, and enter into the kingdom of God."

Last of all Wesley looked forward to the salvation of Israel as the fulfillment of all the Old Testament promises (Works 2:494-495).

To this point Wesley has not addressed the particular way in which the gospel would reach the non-Christian religious traditions. This is due to his conviction that a degree of spirituality not yet seen in professing Christians was prerequisite to effective Christian witness. He does not expect a significant move toward Christ among the other

religious traditions until Christians became more credible. But after the projected spread of the revival among the "Christian" nations Wesley visualizes a strong, if not irresistible movement among people of other religions (Works 2:495-496):

> The grand stumbling-block being thus happily removed out of the way, namely the lives of the Christians, the Mahometans will look upon them with other eyes, and begin to give attention to their words . . . . Observing "the Christian dogs," as they used to term them, to have changed their nature, to be sober, temperate, just, benevolent -- and that in spite of all provocations to the contrary -- from admiring their lives they will surely be led to consider and embrace their doctrine. . . . All the prophets of lies shall vanish away, and all the nations that followed them shall acknowledge the great Prophet of the Lord, "mighty in word and deed," and "shall honour the Son, even as they honour the Father."

Wesley shares the same optimism for the evangelization of the Native Americans, in spite of their previous contact with "Christian" settlers. "The poor American savage will no more ask, 'What, are the Christians any better than us?' When they see their steady practice of universal temperance, and of justice, mercy and truth" (Works 2:496).[1]

The sine qua non of effective evangelization among other religious traditions is the relative holiness, virtue and power seen in the lives of the witnesses (Works 2:496):

> The holy lives of Christians will be an argument they will not know how to resist; seeing the Christians steadily and uniformly practise what is agreeable to the law written in their own hearts, their prejudices will quickly die away, and they will gladly receive "the truth as it is in Jesus."

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1. Interestingly, these remarks of Wesley's are near duplicates of some made by Pope Paul III, almost two and half centuries before in 1537: "The Indians and other peoples which may yet be discovered in the future shall only be converted by the example of a good and holy life" (Shorter 1988:21-22).

Assuming the vitality of the revived Christian, Wesley returns to his prediction of the specific path the gospel will take through the "heathen nations." He expects those which border on Christian nations, or which have extensive commerce with them, to be the first evangelized. He is assured that "the God of love will then prepare messengers and make a way" into the furthest recesses of "the interior parts of Africa," into China and Japan, "with all the countries adjoining to them."

Facing the challenge of lands completely isolated from any outside contact, Wesley maintains the same confidence. God can provide messengers and he can provide means, even if he has to transport them by the Spirit, as in the case of Philip (Works 2:497):

> Yea, he can find out a thousand ways, to foolish man unknown. And he surely will; for heaven and earth may pass away; but his word shall not pass away. He will "give his Son the uttermost parts of the earth for his possession."

Key Principles of the "General Spread"

The Methodist movement continued on its triumphant course at least throughout the rest of Wesley's life, enabling him to die in the continuing confidence that "God is with us" (Moore 1825: 392-393). For Wesley, this certainty of the "general spread of the gospel" seemed to stand on six key points. The first was his confidence in the power of prevenient grace, the joyfully energizing assurance that God's saving purpose and provision for the world is universal. Second, although God chooses to work through "assisting" (and not overpowering) grace, this grace is relentless and will result at last in the fulfillment of all

his promises. Third, God incarnates his message and consistently uses human instruments to spread the gospel. Fourth, in order to be effective, these witnesses must be clear examples of God's saving power. Fifth, such witnesses can depend upon the "previous" work of God in every human heart; they can expect to find a deep resonance between their message and the universal witness of God's Spirit in even the most hostile people. And sixth, God's grace functions in revealed and discernible patterns, enabling his witnesses to work in concert with his salvation design.

These principles not only empowered the Wesleyan revival, they were Wesley's practical guidelines for ministry in a "world parish." They were born of experience and Wesley's reading of the Scripture (Baker 1987:9). To him they seemed as applicable to the local church as to the most distant "mission field." In various forms of practice they launched and, for a while, sustained the worldwide Methodist revival.

The following consideration of some of the Methodists who had a particular passion to take the gospel beyond Britain's borders reveals a gradual alteration in some of Wesley's principles for "God's final design." This can be traced to subtle transitions taking place as Methodism grew into its own separate organizational identity.[1] Slowly,

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1. Preparing for the eventual transfer of leadership and hoping to forestall further controversy, in 1784 Wesley took legal steps with the help of Thomas Coke to define guidelines concerning property and appointments within the Connexion. This was a significant first step in Methodism's path toward denominational independence, contrary to Wesley's lifelong hope that it would remain a reviving movement within the established Anglican church structure. John Vickers explains (1969:68):

the key theological categories of the "world parish" were overshadowed by the implications of national, cultural and denominational boundaries (Davies & Rupp 1965:299-315).

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> The year 1784 was a momentous one for Methodism . . . The enrollment in the Chancery of the Deed of Declaration marked the coming-of-age of the Methodist movement, which despite Wesley's expressed intentions, now had an independent existence.

CHAPTER 5

FROM WORLD PARISH TO WORLD MISSIONS

This chapter stands as a cursory survey, in place of what would ideally be a more thorough investigation, of the complex flow of events that marked the last quarter of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. This was the period that saw the formation of the United States through armed revolt against one of the world's great monarchies. The French Revolution followed. Napolean rose and fell; and on his campaigns depended the lives of hundreds of thousands and the political configurations of Europe. Through it all, England emerged stronger than before and ready to build its global empire. Dwarfed by these historical movements, but still very significant, was the death of John Wesley and a period of transition in Methodist movement. Many influences, both personal and circumstantial, combined to form the character of Methodism as it emerged into the nineteenth century -- particularly as it joined the rapidly growing missionary concern of the "civilized" Christian world.

In the Methodism of Wesley's vision <u>every</u> ministry expression was viewed as a form of "mission" work in that it was part of bringing lost persons, anywhere in the "world parish," to full salvation. The call "to preach the gospel" did not apply only to the proclamation act. Given Wesley's unique concept of the boundlessness of salvation and the role of human choice in the process, even the more pastoral discipling and

maintaining functions of the Methodist Societies remained an essential part of any mission to save lost persons.[1]

Theologically speaking, even mature Christians never reached the point where they no longer needed some aspect of the "mission" efforts that were leading them to salvation. No one within the movement was so established as to be "outside" the mission field. Likewise, no Methodist was exempt from his own "missionary service" wherever he found himself in the "world parish" (Works 9:41). Only the promises and commands of Scripture defined the boundaries of the Christian experience, and given Wesley's dynamic, relational interpretation of Christian faith, the process of discipleship remained always both vulnerable to

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1. Wesley had a passionate concern for nurturing new believers (Wesley quoted in A. Wood 1967:186):

> This is the great work: not only to bring souls to believe in Christ but to build them up in their most holy faith. How grievously are they mistaken who imagine that as soon as the children are born they need take no more care of them! We do not find it so. The chief care then begins.

This conviction had both theological and experiential validation. Wesley believed in God's assisting grace, but he also affirmed the place of human choice which is vulnerable to many persuasive influences and needs consistent support. His own experience taught him that seldom do "babes" in Christ survive when they remain unprotected (A. Wood 1967:188). These convictions had tremendous practical implications for the way Wesley conducted his ministry, and for the structure of the Methodist societies (Jackson, Works 1:416):

> From the terrible instances I met with there [Tanfield] (and indeed in all parts of England), I am more and more convinced that the devil himself desires nothing more than that the people of any place should be half-awakened and then left to themselves to fall asleep again. Therefore I determine, by the grace of God, not to strike one stroke in any place where I cannot follow the blow.

decay and open-ended to limitless glory.[1]

Practically speaking, however, there was a growing sense of a need to distinguish between the work of the more "established" home ministries, and fledgling efforts abroad.[2]

Later in the nineteenth century the lines between church and mission were drawn more clearly as both the Methodist Episcopal Church in America and the various branches of British Methodism broke off and further solidified their corporate (and national) identities. Simultaneously various missionary societies formed on both sides of the Atlantic (Reid & Gracey 1879:11ff). These also encouraged a stronger dichotomy between the domains of church and mission. It appears, however, that the criteria for distinguishing between the two ran mostly along geographical, national, and cultural lines. Without mission strategists taking into consideration the theological implications of these criteria, a "sending" mentality began to characterize the relationship be-

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1. For a clear summary of how Wesley used Scripture to define his concept of the Christian life, see The Character of a Methodist (Works 9:35ff). Wesley often stressed watchfulness in view of the very real possibility of spiritual lapses. See his sermon "The Great Privilege of Those Who Are Born of God" (Works 1:438). See also such hymn references as (Works 7:465):

> Arm me with jealous care,
> As in thy sight to live;
> And Oh! thy servant, Lord, prepare
> A strict account to give.
> Help me to watch and pray
> And on thyself rely,
> Assured, if I my trust betray,
> I shall forever die.

2. Wesley likely would have raised a note of caution at the presumption of "establishment." Yet he also recognized varying degrees of responsibility based on spiritual maturity.

tween church and mission. This was significantly different from the more inclusive "expanding" pattern visualized by Wesley.

Bernard Semmel has shown how Methodist mission work became increasingly, and intentionally separate from home ministries (1973:152-169). Because this shift was so gradual, Methodism was late getting into the missionary movement in an official way. Ironically, the Methodists, whose vitality had predated and inspired the evangelical renewal among the Anglicans and Dissenting churches,[1] were among the last to establish a formal missionary society. By this time the reproach of missions had been replaced by widespread popular enthusiasm, particularly among the middle-class.[2] The new missionary bandwagon found its place, and its validation, in the parade celebrating the defeat of Napoleon, and the now obvious British "manifest destiny" to "civilize"

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1. As we have seen in the case of Henry Venn, some of the evangelical Anglicans were reluctant to acknowledge Methodist connections. However, the primary founders of both the London and the Church Missionary Societies had strong Methodist roots (Candler 1904:148). Ironically, the Baptists seemed least sheepish about their debt to Wesley. Carey's great-grandson biographer wrote (Carey 1923:37):

> His happiest fortune lay in being born on the tidal wave of the Wesleys and Whitefield. Almost to the end of Carey's English years, as for a score before his birth, John Wesley was Britain's super-evangelist. Over the length of Britain Wesley demonstrated through fifty years the force of the preached gospel Carey's zeal to evangelize the heathen was more intense for his having lived in the blaze of Wesley's achievement.

2. "What had happened was that the leaders of the [Methodist] Connection had turned Arminian Idealism from the succouring of the poor to the furthering of the world-mission of the English middle-class" (Semmel 1973:148).

Vickers (1969:1): "Mr. Wesley's connexion was moving steadily towards that established respectability which was to mark the Wesleyanism of the early nineteenth century."

and commercialize the heathen world (Davies & Rupp 1965:299ff).

The Baptist, London, and Church Missionary Societies were well established by 1813, and the Methodists found themselves following in patterns and priorities often unrelated to their own distinctive theological roots (Semmel 1973:179-182). But it was a peaceful and productive new relationship. Under the umbrella of mutual concerns to see the "heathen" of the world redeemed and the desire to maintain "social stability at home,"[1] even the previously irreconcilable Calvinist - Arminian differences became insignificant (Semmel 1973:106-109). Also, the fact that the world was so rapidly "growing" brought relief to old territorial tensions. "No longer did evangelicals [in Anglican and Dissenting Churches] feel themselves fighting for a foothold in English society: they thought now in terms of a universal mission" (Davies & Rupp 1965:299).

Such "unity" between previously "warring" factions certainly removed a reproach from the witness of Christianity to the world. The missionary enterprise very early showed its potential for encouraging

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1. Semmel has pointed out the potentially unsettling political implications of Methodism's enthusiastic Arminianism. During his life Wesley had walked a fine line trying to avoid "radicalism and revolution" while at the same time maintaining "an evangelizing fervor." The reality of two democratic revolutions on either side of England made political and social stability a real concern for church leaders "anxious to establish [Methodism's] respectability, [and] fearful of repression by [the] state." Semmel shows how mission interests served as an escape valve for excess enthusiasm and social concern. "When it seemed as if Arminian Enthusiasm might become a threat to order, its force was diverted to foreign missions, and the character of Methodism was transformed" (1973:147).

ecumenical cooperation.[1] However, it is important for this study to note that the peace may not have been born of a genuine compromise. A significant part of the Wesleyan distinctive seems to have fallen by the way in the union of Methodist revival with the larger "evangelical" movement which launched the "great" missionary nineteenth century (Latourette 1953:1061ff).

At the conclusion of his thesis,[2] Philip Capp suggests that "Methodist Missions do not properly belong to the Modern Missionary Movement which holds Carey as its father" (1958:59). It would require a very specific study of Methodist mission history to prove conclusively Capp's suggestion, however, much in the following survey tends to support his view. It may well be that truly "Methodist" missions barely got started before being overwhelmed in the forces which have shaped the character of modern missions from William Carey to the present day. If so, a major contributing factor seems to have been the dynamics of leadership transition within the Methodist movement from 1783-1813.

The generation between 1783 and 1813 was marked by significant disagreement and a variety of conflicting visions for the future of Methodism (Semmel 1973:110ff; Works 9:1-29). Wesley's death in 1791 had not come as a surprise, and by that time many Methodist leaders had formulated strong opinions about the priorities and leadership of the very heterogeneous movement. The twenty years following his death

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1. As we will see later this was part of Melville Horne's early dream (1815:42-43) and later motivation in supporting the London Missionary Society.

2. An Inquiry into John Wesley's Understanding of the Nature of Methodism with Reference to the Christian World Mission (1958).

saw a complex sorting process as leadership shifted into the hands of younger men, many of whom had only limited contact with Wesley in his old age.[1]

Coke's last departure from England in December of 1813 -- he died in early 1814 on shipboard -- marks the end of what we are calling "early" Methodist missions, and this date sets the outside limit of this study. His relationship with Wesley, as well as the fact that Wesley endorsed most of his mission activity after 1786 suggests that this segment of history immediately following Wesley's death was still punctuated by his personal influence.

As already mentioned, by 1813 a variety of other interests and agendas, many of them alien to Wesley's theology, were already competing to set the priorities of the Methodist movement. With Coke out of the picture, the way was open to significant changes within the Methodist leadership and patterns of ministry.[2] But before condemning this sup-

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1. John Vickers, author of Thomas Coke: Apostle of Methodism, offers rich insight into some of the transitional dynamics in the Methodist movement during Wesley's later years and immediately following his death (1776-1814). He suggests that Wesley himself might have forestalled some of the problems that followed his death by more effectively delegating real leadership to them before he died (1969:42-43):

> He did not easily confide in his lay-assistants, or delegate to them matters of real importance: they remained assistants, to be consulted regularly, yet without being given a share in the government of the Connexion.

2. A remarkable overview of these dynamics as they particularly relate to missions can be found in Theodore R. Doraisamy's What Hath God Wrought: Motives of Mission in Methodism from Wesley to Thoburn, (1983:1-65). In it he draws heavily from Bernard Semmel's The Methodist Revolution (1973:81-109, 146-198). Semmel looks at the sociopolitical implications of Methodist Arminianism and evangelical enthusiasm as key

posed loss of distinctives and conformity to outside pressure, one must consider the reality of the historical and political-economic context. As attractive as it sounds, was Wesley's vision for a global, uniformly-expanding Methodism realistic? How was Methodism to balance its theological ideals against the press of practical realities?

In spite of all that has been said, even Wesley recognized the necessity of some provision for Methodist "missions" as an officially recognized and supervised arm of the Methodist revival.[1] Although the fundamental issues facing lost humanity are universal, there are also legitimate and challenging structural differences between the modes of home ministry and ministry abroad. Wesley knew this from his own experience of the many practical complexities of overseeing the American Methodist societies in absentia.[2] After independence, administration

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factors accounting for the sudden "go-ahead" toward foreign missions around 1813. Coke's departure from the leadership center in London also played an important role in the balance of Methodist bureaucratic power. Semmel includes a fascinating analysis of the millenialistic interpretation given to the final British defeat of Napoleon, whom many regarded as the "anti-Christ" (1973:155-157).

1. See Wesley's endorsement of Coke's Address in Appendix B, page 294.

2. However, he may not have realized them quite as keenly as did those on the receiving end of his vision. Reflecting from the American side in 1788, the newly ordained "Bishop" Francis Asbury expressed his frustration with Wesley's previous attempts to maintain control (quoted in Vickers 1969:117):

> I am sure that no man or number of men in England can direct either the head or the body here unless he or they should posses divine powers, be omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent . . . For our old, old Daddy [i.e. Wesley] to appoint conferences when and where he was pleased, to appoint a joint superintendent [Coke] with me, were strokes of power we did not understand.

concerns grew more difficult. One can only speculate how Wesley would have dealt with the problems the next century brought for the propagation of the gospel within the burgeoning British empire of the nineteenth century, or how he would have pursued mission amid the subsequent bids for both national and ecclesiastical independence around the world.

Nor do we know how Wesley would have handled the dynamics of ministry among non-Western cultures. He never had to face personally the challenge of extreme cultural diversity within the Methodist movement.[1] At the time of Wesley's death the widest cross-cultural gap Methodism had bridged was in its ministry among the significantly Anglicized slave population of the West Indies. Although Wesley was aware of cultural differences, his language sometimes betrays a not-so-benign sense of ethnocentric superiority and condescension typical of eighteenth-century England (Works 2:485). How would Wesley's two-hundred-year-old "missiological" principles hold up in a modern world more culturally diverse than he could have imagined?

These considerations raise legitimate questions about the feasibili-

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1. In 1735 Wesley had sailed for Georgia in hopes of becoming a missionary to the Indians. However his journal indicates very little meaningful contact, and that a variety of circumstances prevented an effective ministry among them (Jackson, Works 1:35).

Wesley's letter to John Horton in 1735 reveals the influence of a "noble savage" perspective toward the American Indians, as well as his uninformed idealism about the simplicity of cross-cultural communication of the gospel (Works 25:439): "They [the Indians] are as little children, humble, willing to learn, and eager to do the will of God. And consequently they shall know of every doctrine I preach, whether it be of God."

ty of Wesley's dream for a homogeneous world-Methodism apart from a parallel world-wide spread of Anglo-Saxon culture:[1] Was his vision of "scriptural Christianity" simply a glorified image of British civilization? They also challenge the validity of seriously considering the doctrinal distinctives of a man whose experience is so different from anything facing world missions today.

On the other hand, Wesley's criteria for Methodist identity were remarkably transcultural, being largely a collection of scriptural commands and promises which could bear translation into any context.[2] His "catholic spirit" was genuine and strong (Works 2:79). Likewise his dedication to a real, experiential, social religion of love, joy, and selfless service may have circumvented some of the complexities of translating a more doctrinally-based gospel into other worldviews.

Regardless of whatever Wesley might have done at the helm of world

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1. Capp writes: "It seems clear that Wesley visualized the possibility of a Methodist World Mission only if the Methodists could remain a united body of Scriptural Christians." He then quotes from Wesley's last letter to America (Capp 1958:48-49):

> See that you never give place to one thought of separating from your brethren in Europe. Lose no opportunity of declaring to all men that the Methodists are one people in all the world; and that it is their full determination so to continue.

2. From Wesley's Character of a Methodist (Works 9:35ff):

> Who is a Methodist . . . ? I answer: a Methodist is one who has "the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him," one who "loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength." God is the joy of his heart, and the desire of his soul, which is constantly crying out, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee!"

Methodism amid the rapidly changing global circumstances, the actual undertaking of Methodist mission efforts to the limits of the British cultural and imperial frontier was left in the hands of his successors. These applied, and sometimes modified, the Wesleyan message in practice. In many ways, their work was the test of Wesley's doctrines. Having briefly acknowledged the turbulent transitional character of this era, both within the ranks of Methodism and at global political-economic level, we now turn to the missionary legacies of Thomas Coke, Melville Horne, and Joshua Marsden. For each of these, the doctrine of universal prevenient grace was axiomatic and essential to their motivational base. But it also clearly informed their vision for how missions ought to be done. Each will show in their own way the feasibility of Wesley's grace-driven vision for the "general spread of the gospel."

CHAPTER 6

THOMAS COKE

Introduction

Thomas Coke was a recently-ordained Anglican clergyman when he first met John Wesley on August 13, 1776. The Methodist movement was well-established, gaining respectability and stability, and Wesley, age seventy-three, was concerned for its continuation after his death (Vickers 1969:1). Coke was twenty-eight, energetic, restless, and already creating a controversy in his parish because of his "Methodistic" zeal (Vickers 1969:26-36). Ironically, his only contact with the Methodists at that time had been indirect, through his reading some of Wesley's and Fletcher's published work. However, the impact had been powerful.[1] Coke hoped that he would find in Wesley the guidance he

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1. Vickers (1969:24) includes a letter of appreciation from Coke to Fletcher. In it one can sense something of Coke's attitude as a young minister, as well as his harmony with much of Wesleyan doctrine:

> Revd. Sir,
> I take the liberty, tho' unknown to you, but not unacquainted with your admirable publications, of writing a letter of sincerest thanks for the spiritual instruction as well as entertainment which they have afforded me; and the spirit of candour and Christian charity which breathed throughout your writings . . . Your excellent Checks to Antinomianism have rivetted me in an abhorrence and detestation of the peculiar Tenets of Calvin: . . . Your Essay on Truth has been more particularly blessed to me . . . I do humbly beg that you will pray for me: . . . a thousand or more immortal souls come to me on every Lord's Day in the

needed for his own personal spiritual quest, and perhaps a place in the Methodist movement (Vickers 1969:33).

Although at that time Wesley advised Coke to return to his parish ministry, a bond was formed between the two which would later prove decisive for the Methodist movement. Looking back on that meeting Wesley recorded in his journal: "A union then began which I trust shall never end" (Vickers 1969:2). Considering the contextual factors of this moment in both the life of John Wesley and the life of the Methodist movement, John Vickers summarizes, "Thomas Coke was the man to match this hour" (1969:1).

It is difficult to resist the temptation to retell the fascinating stories of Coke's life as Methodism's missionary "pioneer." This study, however, must limit itself to a few historical facts and to the two key missionary documents written by Coke in his zeal to mobilize Methodism on a global level.[1] In considering these, the primary concern will be to see how the doctrine of prevenient grace found expression in Coke's life, writing and missionary vision. Also important will be any sign of adjustment or alteration in Wesley's normative concepts of the "world parish" and the "general spread of the gospel."

.Continued. .

> Afternoon to receive their portion of the manna of the word, of the bread of everlasting life.

1. These two documents are rare and copies difficult to find in the U.S. outside of personal collections. Photo copies of both A Plan of the Society for the Establishment of Missions among the Heathens (1783/4), and An Address to the Pious and Benevolent (1786) can be found in the B. L. Fisher Library at Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, Kentucky. They also appear transcribed in Appendixes A and B of this study.

From South Petherton to the World

The decisive break in Coke's ministry came in March, 1777. Following his August interview with Wesley, Coke returned to his appointment at South Petherton with increased zeal and determination "to turn it into a Methodist parish" (Vickers 1969:33). This took form in an increase of preaching fervor and frequency. He began conducting house meetings during the week throughout the parish, even extending his efforts into bordering parishes, much to the annoyance of his neighbor priests.[1] Coupled with a combination of several other grievances, this was enough to result in Coke's violent expulsion from his parish on March 30, 1777 (Vickers 1969:35). By June 25 he had joined Wesley and the Methodist movement,[2] although there is some evidence of last-minute hesitation on Coke's part to so dramatically "bid adieu to his honourable name" (Vickers 1969:37).

Wesley may have had some reservations regarding Coke's spiritual maturity, but he very much needed what Coke was uniquely qualified to offer. As an ordained minister Coke was able to assist in Wesley's

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1. In this he seems to have been following Wesley's specific instructions. One account of the interview quoted by Vickers (1969:33) states:

> Mr. Wesley, with marked sobriety, gave him [Coke] an account of the way in which he and his brother proceeded at Oxford, and advised the Doctor to go on in the same path, doing all the good he could, visiting house to house, omitting no part of his clerical duty.

2. A letter from Wesley to Walter Churchey says: "Dr. Coke promises fair, and gives us reason to hope that he will bring forth not only blossoms but fruit. He has behaved exceedingly well and seems to be aware of his grand enemy, applause" (Telford, Letters 6:267).

extensive sacramental duties. As a doctor of civil law, Coke was invaluable to Wesley in drawing up the legal documents which solidified the structure of a very large, heterogeneous and often unruly movement.[1] His credentials, diplomatic gifts and intense loyalty made him a natural choice for resolving numerous controversies in which he acted as Wesley's ambassador. Wesley also trusted his preaching, not only for its consistent winsome quality and fruit, but also for its doctrinal balance. Coke quickly worked himself into the heart of the Methodist revival -- and into the jealously coveted position at the aging Wesley's side (Vickers 1969:41-67; Findlay & Findlay 1913:14-15).

Coke was known for his energetic, excitable temperament, and a tendency to be impulsive and outspoken (Findlay & Findlay 1913:15). What part of his zeal for missions can be attributed to these factors is open to question, but missionary fervor seems to have been a part of his character from the very beginning of his involvement with the Methodists. If Coke came to the Methodists with missionary concern it was only amplified by his contact with Wesley. Second-hand witnesses say that following Coke's dismissal from his parish, Wesley had counseled him to "go and preach the gospel to all the world" (Vickers 1969:131). Whatever the original sources of Coke's missionary inspiration, Wesley's vision for a "world parish" seemed to fit him perfectly from the start. And in this Coke seems to have even exceeded Wesley (Vickers 1969:131):

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1. "More and more members of the Methodist societies were converts with little or no religious background, or with dissenting rather than Anglican connexions" (Vickers 1969:31). See also Gordon Rupp's preface in Wesley's Works (9:1-29).

> Wesley refused to be confined to a single parish: Coke found even the nation too narrow a sphere. Despite his multifarious activities, not the least his important role in American Methodism, it is as founder of the overseas missions of British Methodism that Coke is chiefly remembered. Nor is this emphasis unjustified, for Coke so whole-heartedly took to himself Wesley's world parish that he must have overstepped more national boundaries than any other man of his time.

Despite this common ground, there were very real differences between Coke and Wesley which can be traced to the factors of temperament, age, the specific call of God for each man. For the most part, however, these differences seemed complementary. Coke remained energetically committed to Wesley, and Wesley kept him busy enough that he had only limited time to pursue his own agendas.

Wesley's primary concern in the years of his acquaintance with Coke were the consolidation and preservation of Methodism. Although Coke was instrumental in this process, his personal vision was more toward the expansion of Methodism. Wesley described some of the contrasting dynamics of their relationship by a graphic analogy: "Dr. Coke and I are like the French and the Dutch. The French have been compared to a flea, and the Dutch to a louse. I creep like a louse, and the ground I get I keep; but the Doctor leaps like a flea, and is sometimes obliged to leap back again" (Vickers 1969:46). While Wesley was busy keeping the Methodist "ground," Coke had his eyes on the world. As we will see, Wesley's analogy proved to be not only descriptive but prophetic.

One of the reasons that Coke had to "leap back" on at least one occasion is traceable to Wesley's own intervention. Prior to 1778, the foreign ministry of Methodism had been carried on largely through the

efforts of laymen, such as Nathaniel Gilbert and John Baxter in the West Indies. American Methodism had been planted by German-Irish immigrants Philip Embury, Barbara Heck and Robert Strawbridge (Davey 1951:7). In its early years it was nurtured by lay preachers from such unlikely sources as the British army.[1] Starting in 1769, Wesley had sent some lay preachers from England, among them Francis Asbury. However, the tensions leading up to the American revolution complicated the relationship between American and British Methodists, especially after Wesley's public criticism of the revolution.[2]

This appears to have been an awkward period for Methodism beyond its British borders. At times it seems that Wesley's Tory loyalties[3] and concern for the stability of the Methodist Societies in England may have eclipsed his world vision. Perhaps there were inadequate resources to respond to all the needs. Whatever the cause, hindsight

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1. Captain Thomas Webb, a retired British officer settled on Long Island in 1767 and began a fruitful home and itinerant ministry in the New York area. A full account of his life and ministry can be found in an article by Frank Baker, "Captain Thomas Webb, Pioneer of American Methodism" in Religion in Life (1965). See also Baker (1976:51ff).

Candler also gives some stirring anecdotes of fervent Methodists within the ranks of the British army (1904:132-138).

2. Wesley's 1778 sermon, "The Late Work of God in North America," includes his prediction that in their defeat the Americans would receive the punishment they deserved for their "arrogance" and spirit of "independency" (Works 3:594ff). See also his essays: "A Calm Address to the American Colonies" (Jackson, Works 11:80), and "A Seasonable Address to the more serious part of the Inhabitants of Great Britain, respecting the Unhappy Contest between us and our American Brethren" (Jackson, Works 11:119).

3. Series editor, Albert Outler provides more helpful information on Wesley's toryism in the introduction to Sermon 111 (Works 3:564-565).

might suggest that the failure to seize some key opportunities during the period of 1776-1784 could account for 1) the extreme and controversial measures taken to "catch up" in addressing pastoral needs in America,[1] 2) missed opportunities in India,[2] and 3) a few embarrassing incidents and false starts at the beginning of Methodist missions to Africa (Barclay 1949:114-115; Vickers 1969:288-299).

At the British Methodist Conference in 1778 there was "an opportunity of putting foreign missions on an official footing" which was "cast aside" (Vickers 1969:132). This had come in the form of a request for Methodist missionaries from two princes of Calabar on the Guinea Coast. In the process of escaping from slavery these men had passed through Bristol, felt the influence of the Methodist society there, and were now eager to have the Methodist message preached in their own country. Two German brothers from the Bristol Society immediately responded, but both died shortly after their arrival in Africa. A second petition for missionaries followed. Coke, although too new to Methodism to have earned the necessary credibility, wrote a circular letter and began a campaign to enlist volunteers and support for this missionary enterprise (Davies & Rupp 1965:299). The campaign found positive responses in at

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1. Wesley's decision to ordain Methodist ministers for the church in America, through ordaining Coke and Asbury as bishops, set off a painful reaction among those more staunchly Anglican among the Methodists, not the least of which was his brother Charles. Vickers gives an account of the repercussions of this move in his chapter "The Aftermath" (1969:100ff).

2. In spite of the fact that the way seemed open in 1786, Coke would not be able to undertake the mission he had envisioned until thirty years later (Findlay & Findlay 1913:21-22).

least two young ministers who were moved to accept the challenge.[1] However, it soon became clear that Coke had "leapt" far ahead of Wesley and the general attitude of the Conference.[2] In the end his proposal was rejected. (Vickers 1969:132; Davey 1951:6).

A likely explanation for Wesley's refusal of this opportunity for witness in the "world parish" was his vision of the gradual "expansion growth" of Christianity and his commitment not to sacrifice territory already held for the uncertain prospects of new gain. In a letter to the other of Coke's volunteers, Duncan McAllum, Wesley said, "You have nothing to do at present in Africa. Convert the heathen in Scotland" (Telford, Letters 6:316).

Timing was another key factor crucial in Wesley's concept of God's

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1. John Pickard wrote: "While I was in this circuit [Londonderry], I received a circular letter respecting an African Mission. As soon as I read it, I felt a strong desire to offer myself to go." Pickard struggled with the thought of leaving home and the the supposed dangers of the African climate, but came to a sincere assurance that it was God's will. "Having received this clear answer to my prayer, I hesitated no longer; but offered myself freely and fully, if approved of my brethren in Conference." Although he later doubted the wisdom of the conference decision, he submitted to their judgment. "But they did not approve of the Mission itself, on account of the war [with the American Colonies]; so the matter was for that time laid aside" (Telford 1912:236-237).

2. This was not the last time that Coke's missonary zeal would run counter to Wesley's goals and method. As late as 1789 and 1790 references can be found in Wesley's correspondence indicating differences in their approach. In a letter to Peard Dickinson, April 11, 1789 Wesley remarks cryptically with no further explanation, "Ought we to suffer Dr. Coke to pick out one after another of our choicest young preachers?" Presumably Coke was again recruiting staff for a mission project. Wesley also disliked some of Coke's fund-raising methods. Wesley wrote this response to Thomas Taylor on April 4, 1790, "I did not approve of Dr. Coke's making collections either in yours or any other circuit. I told him so, and I am not well pleased with his doing it. It was very ill done" (Telford, Letters 8:129, 211).

providence. The operative phrase in his advice to McAllum was most likely, "at present." In his account of the Conference, Joseph Benson said, "after the matter was seriously considered, it was concluded that the time had not yet arrived for sending missionaries to Africa" (Vickers 1969:132) (emphasis added). This caution was consistent with Wesley's fear of letting ministry opportunities become temptations to overstep the limits of resources for the effective pastoral care and nurture of the persons already "awakened."

Coke seemed, in Wesley's opinion, to have crossed into that dangerous territory. However, it was probably at the time a difficult line to see. It is easy to imagine that given the war with the American colonies and the many opportunities nearer home the moment seemed best suited for less risky endeavors than beginning an official foreign mission effort (Telford 1912:237). But, again this is hindsight and given to the tendency to second-guess past decisions. Looking back at the Conference, John Pickard, one of the missionary volunteers, saw their decision as a missed opportunity.

> I have often thought since that they were too cautious . . . . I know it was tenderness in my dear brethren; but I have always been of the opinion that we ought to have gone [to Africa]; and if the Lord ever restores me to tolerable health, and it is judged right to send out a mission into those dark regions, I hope I shall be as ready to go as ever. (Vickers 1969:132n; Telford 1912:237)

Regardless of their differences of perspective on timing and strategy, Coke and Wesley -- the "flea" and the "louse" -- left the

Conference together, traveling as colleagues to Bristol[1] and continuing on a more lengthy tour of western England (Jackson, Works 4:133). Coke spent the next years energetically and loyally representing Wesley and Methodist concerns all over England. However, his missionary vision was far from dim.

In the meantime the war with America had come to its surprising (for Wesley) end, and new era of Methodism was about to begin. The neglected American Methodists under the lay-ministry of Francis Asbury were crying for more pastoral care, which England, for understandable reasons, was reluctant to supply (Thompson 1957:63-65). Wesley was realizing that the non-formal, auxiliary relationship with the American Methodists could not continue, and was formulating a plan for addressing the needs there. Although Coke would play the major role in implementing Wesley's plan, at this time he was busy undertaking a plan of his own for establishing a Methodist mission support base. By early 1784[2] he had written and published his Plan of the Society for the Establishment of Missions among the Heathens, had convened the first annual general meeting of the society, and had already initiated correspondence with a mission contact in India (Vickers 1969:133-136; Findlay & Findlay 1913:16; Davey 1951:6).

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1. There is a remarkable warmth communicated in Wesley's journal entry on August 17, 1778, considering the controversy of the Conference and the age difference between Coke, 29 and Wesley, 75: "Having soon finished my business there, on Monday, 17, Dr. Coke, my brother, and I took coach for Bristol" (Jackson, Works 4:133) (emphasis added).

2. This was eight years before Carey's famous Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens (1961).

Coke's first mission society began with less than thirty subscribers and did not survive his absence while he went on Wesley's mission to ordain Asbury and establish the Methodist Episcopal Church in America. Nor, however, did it list Wesley's name among its subscribers -- perhaps the most significant factor influencing its future. (Vickers 1969:133-134, 79ff). But this set-back served only to postpone, not to destroy, Coke's missionary dreams. He returned from his travels more eager than ever, but with a more informed and finely focused vision. The striking difference in the character and tone of Coke's second missionary tract, An Address to the Pious and Benevolent,[1] written in 1786, reflects some of these changes in Coke. Even more practically significant is the fact that this document carried with it (at last) the written endorsement of John Wesley as a forward.

This two year hiatus from 1784 to 1786 included Coke's first real mission experience. This and his faithful execution of Wesley's plan seemed to provide what was necessary to bring the two men into essential agreement on the trajectory and pattern for the Methodist missions of the next generation. The geographical component of Coke's original vision was now somewhat altered, most notably in his postpone-

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1. This document was lost to Methodist scholars until 1935 when F. Deaville Walker traced it to a private collector. The account of this discovery and its significance was written up in volume 20 of the Wesley Historical Society Proceedings (Walker 1935-36:154).

ment of the mission to India.[1] However, his passion for the gospel was if anything much stronger. In the end, the second of Coke's missionary plans was almost identical in spirit and strategy to the priorities of Wesley's sermon, "The General Spread of the Gospel."

With this tract published and distributed shortly before the 1786 Conference, Coke was armed to defend the cause of missions once again (Walker 1935-36:157). The results speak for themselves of his success. The conference closed with William Warrener appointed missionary to Antigua, and John Clarke and William Hammet commissioned for ministry among the colonists in Nova Scotia (Walker 1933:37).

Coke himself planned to escort the three new missionaries as far as Nova Scotia when the four left England in September 1786. However, violent storms nearly destroyed their ship, finally blowing the whole company to a providential landfall at Antigua on Christmas Day 1786. Within hours of landing they found the lay minister, John Baxter, and after a few weeks of preaching "Methodism was well planted in the

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1.Vickers explains (1969:139):

> At present, [Coke] told Grant [his contact in India], "our openings in America, and the pressing invitations we have lately received from Nova Scotia, the West Indies, and the States, call for all the help we can possibly afford our brethren in that quarter of the world." But the plans for a mission to Bengal were only shelved, and would be reviewed, he assured Grant, "as soon as the present extraordinary calls from America are answered."

Leeward and Windward Islands"[1] (Findlay & Findlay 1913:19; Vickers 1969:150).

By 1786 the boundaries of Coke's life and ministry had exploded. The world was becoming more his parish than any other person's in Methodism. He was Wesley's primary assistant throughout the British Methodist Connexion. He was co-superintendent of the Methodist Episcopal church in America with the power to ordain ministers for its mission. He was the director, fund-raiser, and driving force behind the new missionary efforts of the Methodist Societies.

The next twenty years would see Coke acting in these capacities to the very limits of his energy and personal resources, often against opposition from within the ranks of an unruly Methodism following

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1. Findlay and Findlay (1913:50) add the following comments supporting the common opinion that the storm which blew Coke and two of the new missionaries from their intended destination was an act of providence in light of the remarkable spiritual receptivity in the West Indies:

> A succession of fierce gales crippled the ship, and drove her from her course to the very spot in the western seas where Methodist voyagers were most needed at this moment. Dr. Coke's coming was joyfully hailed by all classes of the population.
>
> The mission had a course of almost unbroken prosperity in the island for fifty years onward . . . . Within a generation Methodism became practically the "Established Church."

The revival seemed also to play a major role in the transition out of slavery in 1833-34. The government cut short a scheme of mandatory apprenticeship for former slaves "in view of 'the state of religious and social improvement to which' the slaves 'of Antigua have already reached'." By 1833 there were 3000 Methodists in Antigua (Findlay & Findlay 1913:51).

Wesley's death (Horne 1815:187, 188, 193).[1] He died en route to India with six other missionaries, attempting to fulfill his thirty-year-old vision of a mission to Bengal (Vickers 1969:271ff; Findlay & Findlay 1913:18-22).

In wearing all these ministry hats simultaneously Coke exemplified the Methodist view of holistic, unified world ministry without divisions (Davey 1951:5-6; Vickers 1969:304ff).[2] Such a performance seems to have been limited to his particular gifts however, and could not be replicated by committee oversight in the next generation. Those who

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1. In 1794, Methodist missionary Melville Horne (1815:193) made the following comment about Coke and the reluctance of some leaders in the Methodist Conference to act decisively on missions:

> The Reverend Dr. Coke has of late years done something in this way in our West India Islands; and might have done much more, had the Methodist preachers, as a body, given him the unequivocal support, to which his zeal in such a cause should entitle him. Hithereto those Missions may be considered as his Missions, and I flatter myself they will now embark in them, with all their soul, and all their strength.

2. As is often the case, early Methodist missionary efforts were seen by some as threats to "home" ministry. Coke was charged with neglecting the "poor heathens" at home, while asking for their support of missions abroad (Vickers 1969:138). However justified this charge may have been for his successors it was indefensible for Coke. Coke's missionary plan, like that of Wesley's began in "Jerusalem" and worked gradually outward, never losing sight of home needs:

> The juxtaposition in the Address of Scotland and the Channel Islands on the one hand and the West Indies and British North America on the other is a reminder that Home and Overseas Missions had not yet been sundered into separate departments. Certainly, in Coke's mind there was no such division . . . [Coke] recognized that the world mission of the Church begins on its own doorstep. (Vickers 1969:139)

Fearing for the very thing he was accused of, Coke was instrumental in the founding of "Home Missions" in 1805. These were financed from the same Mission Fund shared by all the foreign efforts (Findlay & Findlay 1913:20).

knew Coke felt no need to say that he was without flaws and failings. A man of his temperament, gifts and energy was bound to make many errors and frequently to offend people. It appears, however, that most were willing to overlook his short-comings as the dark side of his even greater strengths. In Appendix C, page 300, there is a tribute to Coke published in 1816 by Joshua Marsden, one of Coke's most loyal missionary lieutenants. This may come as close to a "final" word on Coke's vision and character as can be desired.

Prevenient Grace in Coke's Missionary Activity and Writing

For Thomas Coke there was no question of the universal saving will of God. Perhaps because he joined Methodism after the controversy between Wesley and the Calvinists had already been put to rest, the debate about any sort of a limited atonement did not concern him. Coke had read Fletcher's Checks to Antinomianism and was a thorough evangelical Arminian even several years before joining Wesley (Vickers 1969:23, 24). His lifelong concern was how to fulfill the potentials of this God's saving grace; how to preach the Gospel as widely as possible; how to offer Christ to all people so that, by grace, they might repent and be saved. This practical vs. doctrinal emphasis may account for the fact that nowhere in his two major missionary documents does Coke mention the term "prevenient grace."

Another factor behind the non-doctrinal character of Coke's missionary Plan and Address was his target audience. Coke appealed to people he hoped would financially underwrite mission efforts through

subscriptions and membership in a society of mission benefactors. He used language calculated primarily to inspire their trust and commitment; sometimes using official legal and contractual terminology, sometimes appealing to the heart. As a man committed with all he had to the support of missions,[1] Coke was interested in generating energy and funds more than he was in maintaining doctrinal or denominational purity,[2] a trait Wesley might have wished to temper. He had a keen awareness of the needs of the world, the many "ripe" opportunities for the Gospel, and the potential resources within Methodism to meet those needs. He spent his life working to bridge the gap between the opportunities and their fulfillment. In his eyes, the lack of adequate support was the primary impediment blocking the significant expansion of the Methodist revival.

The fact that his appeals were boldly conceived in financial terms with little effort to justify them on theological grounds suggests that Coke assumed his readers would be among those who already shared his basic vision, and who believed that the potential for salvation for all

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1. Coke: "Whilst I live, the supplying of missions with what they want . . . shall with me supersede every other consideration" (Vickers 1969:284).
Concerned for his independent strategy for supporting missions the Conference selected committees twice -- in 1793, and again in 1804 -- to help Coke with his missionary affairs. Coke's determination to gain the needed support was at times impatient with their oversight. On one occasion Coke wrote to them, "My good, dear brethren, every Friday morning you kept me among you [in meetings] we lost twenty pounds!" (Findlay & Findlay 1913:21).

2. One of the major complaints against Coke's 1784 "Plan" was the fact that he was enlisting the support of those outside the Methodist Connection (Davey 1951:6)

persons was at least a possibility. His approach was consistent. He first highlighted the need or opportunity, then demonstrated the feasibility of addressing those needs through existing resources or by the creation of appropriate new means, closing with an appeal for the needed support to get the project moving. Yet, there are significant theological underpinnings to these very practical and predictable appeals. Wesleyan doctrine permeated his vision of world mission, especially in his second missionary document, the Address to the Pious and Benevolent.

Coke seems to have taken the continuous, grace-given potential for all persons to be saved almost for granted as a theological axiom. The fresh, empowering meaning of prevenient grace came for Coke from its more active and specific role in preparing certain peoples, at certain times to receive the gospel message. This accounts for some of the urgency in Coke's approach to ministry since such moments of "ripeness" might not last forever. His confidence in the prevenient grace which laid the foundation for revival was more than a speculative theological affirmation. He had experienced it in his own preaching and seen its fruit in Great Britain. Before 1784 he had heard of the movement of the Spirit in America and the West Indies. But after his own visits to both places he was sure that God was at work in remarkable ways that seemed to call for an almost unlimited number of harvesters -- immediately.

This section concludes with a comparative analysis of Coke's missionary documents, looking for particular signs of the doctrine of

prevenient grace in practical expression.[1]

The majority of Coke's Plan (290) is devoted to setting down the structure of the society for missions in minute detail. Only item six speaks to the actual practice of missions under the society's direction. However several interesting items stand out in Coke's vision. First among these, the society was to make provision, not only for the support of missionaries, but for others who go abroad "in any Civil Employment." Coke may have been visualizing a sort of "tent-making" approach to ministry, or he may have had in mind the early American tradesmen who were responsible for bringing Methodism first to the colonies. Second, language training seemed to have been a high priority for the society, which was committed to finding the "best Instruction which can be obtained for such Persons . . . before they go abroad." Third, the society was committed to the publication of Scripture "for the Use of any Heathen Country." In this Coke was visualizing one of the first Bible societies. This section closes with a general commitment to "do every other Act which to them [the society] may appear necessary."

In the Plan Coke appeals to a broad motivational base in his subscribers, addressing himself simply to "all the Real Lovers of Mankind." He tries to touch feelings of "Piety and Benevolence" in all people, even those "who are unconnected with the Methodists, and are

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1. References to the documents will be made according to the page numbers of their transcriptions in Appendixes A and B. The Address, being the longer of the two documents, has been marked with paragraph numbers, and citations will refer to these in the following form: (page number:paragraph number), e.g. (297:7).

determined to be so." He hopes for support in the name "the present and eternal Welfare of . . . Fellow Creatures" (290).

In these affirmations and appeals there seems to be nothing uniquely Wesleyan, except perhaps remotely in the provision for "tent-makers" in civil employment and the emphasis on language learning as a sign of the importance of "heart to heart" ministry. These factors, however, are likely no more than very practical concerns for the success of the mission plan, and not the ramifications of a specific theological perspective. And this may have been appropriate to Coke's intention for this particular piece of writing. In the Address (294) we find much more evidence of Coke's "heart" and particular vision for mission. In contrast to the Plan, it contains only one short paragraph addressing clerical and structural concerns (297:8).

One of the most revealing aspects of the Address is the selection of metaphors which Coke uses in his description of missions. He first speaks of "opened doors" of opportunity as he explains the reason for his shift away from the mission to India and toward more pressing and accessible needs closer to home (295:1). This theme is repeated in paragraph 7 in regard to the opportunities specifically "on the continent of America." Only slightly varying the image, Coke also speaks the West Indies in terms of an open "field" (296:5).

The word "field" really belongs more to the larger "harvest" metaphor which dominates Coke's mission language. Because of God's grace and the initial efforts of lay missionaries, he expects "a most glorious gospel-harvest" in the West Indies (296:5). He appeals to what is evidently by then a standard policy statement among the Methodists,

"when God is at any time pleased to pour out his spirit more abundantly, we ought at that time to send more labourers than usual into that part of the harvest" (297:7) (emphasis added).

Speaking of the "spirit of God" with the verb "to pour" brings to mind liquid images related to the idea of "watering" the gospel "seed." Coke seems to see in this gracious "rain" also a form of spiritual refreshment which should be considered a signal for increased activity. "How much more attentive we should be to the times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord, to improve to the utmost all those blessed occasions" (297:7) (emphasis added). Again following the "water" image, he alludes to "Elijah's cloud" which he expects to "spread" providing "a gracious rain [that] shall descend on the inhabitants of the earth," provided "we" do our part by engaging "in the present undertakings in the spirit of faith" (298:10). He concludes with an emphasis on the human role in "unitedly watering the whole earth around us." As this occurs the souls of the "waterers" themselves will be "watered." The result will be a world "vineyard" full of "labourers" bringing in a bountiful harvest (298:11).

Coke uses the image of "leaven" to describe the extensive, pervasive impact possible from small beginnings. Like Wesley's vision of an expanding, continuous spread, Coke sees "the little leaven imperceptibly win[ning] its widening way, till it has leavened the whole lump of mankind" (298:11).

Three final metaphors are light, geographical territory, and "riches." He uses the terms "darkness" and "benighted" to describe the spiritual condition of certain areas where the impact of practical Chris-

tianity is not widely felt (295:2 & 3). Here the need is for Gospel "light." He laments the fact that "the kingdom of Jesus should be circumscribed by such narrow bounds, and Satan rule so great a part of the world" (298:9). Here there is a hint of military, adversarial language. Last he speaks of "the riches of grace" in the context of the economic exploitation of the African slaves in the West Indies (296:5).

Coke's idea of prevenient grace as seen in these images and metaphors is complex. It is universal in its ultimate scope and intention, however, it finds very particular geographical and temporal expression. These expressions in human circumstances are providentially-ordained signals calling for human participation in the "harvest." Coke is convinced of two things in particular: God's particular gracious visitations do not last forever, and they will not find their fulfillment without human cooperation. "And as the Lord is pleased in general to carry on his blessed work by second causes, let the sacred ardour of divine love kindle in your souls, my beloved brethren, a holy zeal of being honoured instruments in promoting it" (298:9) (emphasis added). Although human understanding of God's ultimate timing is limited, we can be sure that global salvation will someday be realized, that "righteousness shall cover the earth," and that Christians will be involved in the process. He concludes, "let us all, as far as lies in our power contribute to this great event, and prepare the way for it."

Clearly the dominant aspect of this perspective is motivational. However, there are some key methodological implications as well. Coke's vision of prevenient grace preparing harvest fields, opening doors, and bringing times of refreshing implies the need to discern the places and

peoples where God is at work in the world. It is also an implicit call to coordinate human efforts with those of the Holy Spirit at a very particular and practical level. The confidence that God is specially at work in a particular context is both an empowering and a guiding factor. It does not give the missionary procedural carte blanche, but calls for sensitivity to the particular ways in which the Holy Spirit is moving beyond having merely opened the door.

Finally, Coke's affirmation of God's use of "second causes," viz. human beings, to complete his work, is a powerful motivator to provide adequate selection and preparation for missionaries. The idea that God's prevenient grace generally requires a complementary human touch to bring it to fulfillment has many significant implications. In keeping with the awareness of this human component, Coke shows remarkable cross-cultural sensitivity in his emphasis upon missionaries who are "native" speakers or "masters" of the language they will be using in ministry (295:3 & 296:4). According to the "leaven" metaphor, Coke, like Wesley, visualized the spread of the gospel at a micro level of "heart to heart" and "house to house." For this reason maximum personal contact is necessary in order for the incarnated message of a holy life to be meaningfully communicated.

Beginning in 1786 Coke was involved in the selection and commissioning of missionaries. This chapter has shown how Coke's theology impacted his own missionary vision and strategy. The next consideration will be to see to what extent these dynamics were perpetuated in the lives of two of his missionaries, Melville Horne and Joshua Mardsen.

CHAPTER 7

MELVILLE HORNE[1]

Introduction

Melville Horne was a young itinerant Methodist preacher at the time Coke was trying to mobilize Methodist missions. The same 1784 Conference to which Coke submitted his Plan "admitted [Horne] on trial" and appointed him to the Liverpool circuit (Tyerman 1882:555). Shortly after this appointment, Horne received his ordination in the Church of England. He then assumed the dual role as preacher on Wesley's Madeley circuit and John Fletcher's curate in the Madeley parish. Fletcher died shortly after, in August of 1785 (Hole 1896:632; Tyerman 1882:555). Horne continued to serve the curacy at Madeley under Fletcher's successor until leaving to become co-chaplain, and first Methodist missionary to Sierra Leone in January 1792 (Hole 1896:632).

Doctrinal disputes over some aspects of Methodist theology brought Horne to a public separation from his Wesleyan roots later in life (Vickers 1969:288, 382-383; Semmel 1973:100). However, at the time of his missionary service and the subsequent publication of his powerfully influential Letters on Missions Horne gladly acknowledged his

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1. There is some variation in the literature of the spelling of Horne's first name. Apparently it was originally "Melvill," then later written "Melville" (Hole 1896:632). This study will use the latter, more common spelling.

Methodist connections, and rich potential of Methodist energy for the missionary task (Semmel 1973:149-150). While it is uncertain precisely how and when he became acquainted with the Methodists,[1] Horne's very close relationship with both Coke and Fletcher is well documented. Biographers claim Horne as both Coke's and Fletcher's "protege" (Vickers 1969:288; Tyerman 1882:555). Horne published several pieces of Fletcher's work posthumously, along with superlative descriptions of Fletcher's character (Tyerman 1882:87-88, 126, 514-515). He also recognized Coke's missionary zeal in his own writings (Horne 1815:193), and "despite their [later] doctrinal differences, used to pay tribute to the many kindnesses Coke had shown him from his youth up" (Vickers 1969:288).

The roots of Horne's missionary motivation were no doubt complex, however his contact with Coke certainly played a part in their formation. Also the fact that he was from the West Indies and keenly aware of needs beyond the borders of Great Britain no doubt contributed something to a world-wide vision. One might also suspect that his early life amid the wealth of a slave-labored West Indian plantation may have created some desire to make restitution for abuses to former Africans. The idea of repaying African slave labor with the good news of the gospel was not uncommon in this era (Appendix B paragraph 5; Semmel

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1. Most likely it was through Fletcher's friendship with Nathaniel Gilbert of Antigua. Horne was the son of another West Indies planter, and the close friend and brother-in-law of Nathaniel Gilbert's eldest son and namesake. The younger Gilbert had settled in Madeley and there "enjoyed the advantages of Fletcher's ministry and counsels." Apparently Gilbert was the means by which Horne was brought into a similarly close relationship as a very young man (Tyerman 1882:513-515; Hole 1896:632).

1973:168). For whatever combination of reasons, Horne eagerly embraced the opportunity of ministry in West Africa.

Horne was selected -- on Coke's strong recommendation -- along with Nathaniel Gilbert to go as co-chaplain with a group of settlers to Sierra Leone (Vickers 1969:288; Semmel 1973:148). However, his loyalty to the settlers and the Sierra Leone Company which was sponsoring the venture was mixed. In the introduction to his Letters Horne describes his intention to use the chaplaincy as a support base from which to undertake his "real" ministry goal -- evangelizing the "native" Temne people (1815:v-vii). Due to health problems Horne returned home fourteen months after his arrival, nearly broken with despair and shame over his failure to establish an African mission.

Providentially, the fruit of his anguish was the writing and publication of Letters on Mission, Addressed to the Protestant Ministers of the British Churches in 1794. Horne was reluctant to publish them in the first place, and following their release had cause to regret his decision (Horne 1815:xii):

> . . . After much hesitation, and being often ready to throw them in the fire, they are now printed. Since they came from the press, I have had an opportunity of collecting the opinions of several friends, some of which were of a nature so far from flattering and pleasant to my feelings, that I immediately stopped the sale of them, and have deliberated earnestly whether I should not consign them to oblivion. But after continuing some days in a state of painful suspense, I determined to venture them into the world . . . .

Despite his fears, the missionary movement of the next century was mightily impacted by Horne's reluctant "venture" in print. Controversial though they were the Letters launched his career as a life-long

missionary advocate to match the energy and zeal of Thomas Coke.

Horne's American editor prefaced the 1815 edition with these words (Horne 1815:iii-iv):

> These letters have been eminently instrumental in exciting that lively interest in the cause of Missions, the effects of which are so visible at the present day.
>
> The author is now actively engaged in promoting the great cause, which he here advocates with such ability and eloquence.
>
> It is hoped, that the perusal of these letters will lead Christians to become more interested in the salvation of the perishing heathen.

At home in England both the Church and the London Missionary Societies acknowledged him among the key instruments of their formation and early development (Hole 1896:17, 18, 50; C. Horne 1908:5ff; Lovett 1899:11ff; Candler 1904:148). On the "field" another young Methodist missionary, Joshua Marsden, would find the Letters among the few cherished pieces of mission literature to guide and sustain him in his early days of ministry on the Nova Scotia circuits (Marsden 1816:ix-x).[1]

Again, resisting the temptation to tell another fascinating life story,[2] the following section turns to focus on Horne's Letters, the

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1. Marsden (1816:X) tells of losing his copy of the Letters from his pocket while riding through a swamp. It was recovered by a settler, who dried it by his fire, and a year later returned the "lost treasure" to the grateful missionary as he passed through on his circuit. "I read [it] with avidity, profit, and delight," wrote Marsden, "and though it is fifteen years this spring since the circumstance occurred, and I have traveled during that period more than twenty thousand miles by sea and land, yet have I preserved the little foundling ever since."

2. In my research I have been unable to find an authoritative biography of Melville Horne, and have been forced to rely on small passages from many sources. One could wish veteran Methodist biographer Luke Tyerman had given in to the desire he expressed in 1882: "Melville Horne was a remarkable man, of whom it would be an easy and pleasant task to write a more than ordinary biography" (1882:513).

earliest piece of practical "Methodist" missiology written from the "field." Do they reflect Wesley's distinctive interpretation of prevenient grace? If so, how?

"Letters on Missions"

Chapter one reflected on the dangers inherent in the questions necessary for effective analysis. The same questions which illuminate also obscure. Examining Horne's Letters through the lens of a study in prevenient grace will expose only a small part of its full message. It may also have a tendency to create a distorted emphasis. Horne did not set out to describe the practical implication of prevenient grace; his object was much larger. But, although this focus is necessarily limiting, it is not without value or justification. The following analysis reveals a definite distinctive character in Horne's missionary vision, one that seems more than coincidentally connected to his Wesleyan roots.

Horne's primary objective seems to have been the mobilization of a comfortable and apathetic British clergy. The first and last chapters deal primarily with the obligation inherent in the gospel itself to spread the good news of Christ around the world. Horne appeals to the same statistics Wesley used to demonstrate the proportion of the world's population yet unreached by living Christian faith (19). He points to the glorious blessings of revelation to the Christian world and the church's dereliction of duty in failing to share it (21). He exposes the clear denial of reality implicit in the hope of some miraculous act of God to fulfill the duties plainly entrusted to the church (21). Pushing his challenge to the established church even further, Horne

boldly renounces the love of comfort and mercenary attitude of most clerics in exchange for the glories of serving Christ by the motivation of the Holy Spirit (24-26). Horne's closing prayer begins to reveal the theological underpinnings of his attack. It is addressed to Christ, the "universal Priest" (27).

There is no doubt about Horne's Wesleyan confidence in an unlimited, global Christian gospel. He opens his second chapter with the following doxology to its promised victorious reign (29):

> The genius and spirit of our religion, the characters ascribed to our Lord of the second Adam, of the High Priest after the order of Melchizedech, and of a Saviour of all people, with may others of similar significance; the various scriptures, which speak of the benefits of his death and intercession, of his kingdom and reign; the prophecies and promises loudly declare the intention of God, that this last and most perfect dispensation of the everlasting gospel should be the religion of every tribe, and kindred, and tongue. Nay, we are repeatedly assured, in the most explicit language, that it shall be so. (emphasis added)

Horne, addressing his fellow clergy, assumed that they must all affirm this truth. The question becomes what to do about it. He concludes that they have not begun to do enough, and that none of the usual objections are an adequate excuse in the face of such a gospel, the clear words of the "great commission," the suffering of the cross, the example of the apostles, and the eternal destiny of the lost (30-40). He makes the pointed statement, once again highlighting his global vision for the gospel: "Surely, our Lord, his Apostles, his Martyrs and Confessors, lived and died not for the benefit of England nor of Christendom alone" (40). He then calls for a united effort of all denominations to "embrace with fraternal arms" in addressing the world's need for the gospel. "Let the press groan no longer with our controversies;

and let the remembrance of the petty interests we have contended for be buried in everlasting oblivion" (43).

Horne closes with a challenge to the clergy to pledge themselves to : "consider it as our indispensable duty to do all that lies in our power to preach the gospel to every creature" (44). It is a call not just to future action but to take responsibility for the failures of the past, lest anyone think that the state of the world (and the church) was in any way blamable on a shortage of God's grace (44-45):

> If we do this [make this commitment], with becoming diligence and zeal, we shall soon have it in our power to confute a plausible objection, with which infidels blaspheme our religion. The partial diffusion of Christianity will then be seen to have originated, not with God, but with men. The philanthropy of God our Saviour will shine forth in its proper amplitude, as extending to all men; and we, the ministers of Christ, shall be made to confess, with honest impartiality and ingenuous shame, that the wretched ignorance and abominable vices of the heathen are chargeable on our wicked disobedience to our Master's commands.

The motivational component of the doctrine of prevenient grace is perhaps the easiest to see and the most readily applicable to mission. The fact that by grace all people are "savable" and intended for full salvation in the will of God destroys all excuses for Christians in the face of a non-Christian world. It lays a massive responsibility on the human bearers of the Gospel to believe that God has already done, and is doing His side of the missionary task, and that the realization of Scripture promises waits only for the effective witness of the church. Like Coke and even many of the non-Wesleyan missionaries, Horne clearly utilizes this energizing aspect of his doctrine to its fullest capacity.

Less obvious are the methodological implications of one's confidence in the previous gracious work of God in all people. What differ-

ence does a motivating confidence in prevenient grace make in the way one approaches the missionary task? Or more importantly, what difference does it make in the way one approaches a group of people who have not yet heard explicitly the gospel of the Christ whose Spirit and grace have long been at work in their lives? It is in answering these questions that Horne seems to make his greatest contribution.

Horne realizes throughout his Letters that the previous presence of grace conveys a significance to existing human situations. Without losing touch with the gospel's call for the complete redemption of these existing realities, he recognizes the need to start with things the way they are and to tailor the gospel presentation to the recipients' frame of reference. In Horne, one finds none of the heavy-handedness so familiar in the caricatures of nineteenth-century missionary practice. The target of his agenda for change is as large as the essential claims of the gospel, and intentionally no larger. In this Horne may be nothing more than a common-sense English pragmatist, but there is also a suspicious consistency between his methodological advice and his theology.

This sensitivity is found in the introduction of his book. Although he laments the often-fatal effects of inland African climate -- Horne was sick with fever himself for the first four months of his stay -- he says that no missionary endeavor can succeed unless the missionary commits himself to live in the villages, not in coastal "civilization." Because of the village structures, the missionary will also have to itinerate from place to place; an equally life-threatening prospect. He summarizes that, dangerous or not, the missionaries "will be obliged to

take the country as it is" (vi).

Similarly, although Horne is writing a book on missions, he clearly says that "no plan can be formed, which will equally apply to nations, who differ in their degree of civilization, their police, their religion, and the face of their country" (67-68). This does not compromise his confidence in his understanding of the universal human need for salvation; it merely affirms his belief that varying circumstances call for a variety of approaches. In light of this, one of his highest priorities for missionary candidates is an attitude of flexibility. "We would have him sincere, open, and affectionate" (92). He warns against any "pertinacity of opinion, and the encouraging of those habits of fastidious delicacy, which grow upon men, who are accustomed in all things to consult only their private feelings" (75).

A key part of the flexibility and openness necessary to understand properly the context in which one ministers is the balance of a community. Although he recognizes the heroic and productive efforts of solo missionaries, he sees this as the exception, not the rule. "David Brainerd, and a few superior minds, may have walked through life, without the consolation of a friend and comforter. But the conversion of the heathen will never be effected by a few such characters" (58). In contrast, Horne expresses high admiration for the Moravian approach of communal missionary endeavor (58). As he reflects on their mission strategy he paints a revealing picture of his own ideal first approach to a mission.

One of the top priorities, once again, is adequate preparation for the missionary to live closely with the people he hopes to evangelize.

This includes even the provision for a means of support within the context he plans to be a part of: "I propose that no Missionary be received until he has acquainted himself with one or other art, by which he may do something towards his own maintenance" (72). It does not include the importation of large amounts of equipment: "A few books, and clothes, with the proper implements of their respective arts, is all they can need, and all they could retain with safety in an uncivilized country" (73).

The missionaries' first task, after providing for their lodging and a place for their worship, is language and culture learning. Horne's description of this process reveals an in-depth commitment on the part of the missionaries, such that it take precedence over the preaching of the gospel (74):

> They will form vocabularies, and reduce the language to rule; make observation on all they see and hear, write it down and commit it to memory; they will acquaint themselves with the religion, government and manner of the natives; begin to instruct youth, communicating all the knowledge they possess, learn to cultivate their lands, and to do everything else needful for their support. During this time they may also give the natives some historical accounts of Christianity, and the leading principles of our morals. But their grand labour will be the acquisition of the language, and the improvement of their piety, as well as the giving of an example to the islanders, by the regular and frequent returns of all the exercises of piety and benevolence. In two years time I suppose them tolerably well acquainted with the language, and those who speak it; their affairs in good train, and a plan of operation laid down with mutual consent. They may now proceed to business and open their commission with due solemnity. (emphasis added)

In this graphic depiction of mission strategy we see a remarkable balance between the evangelical "pastoral urgency" of Horne's first motivational chapters and his concern for laying the proper foundation

for ministry. This is congruent with his admiration of the Methodist itinerancy method which constantly reinforces its base even as it reaches out into new territory (62). In general terms, Horne's goal for missions is "to obtain for Christianity a firm footing and an extensive spread" (70). He shows no interest in sacrificing the former to achieve the latter.

Assuming that a firm foundation has been laid in language and culture learning, and the presentation of a consistent Christian example in the process, how does one actually go about presenting the gospel? Again the implications of confidence in prevenient grace seem to condition Horne's recommendation. He argues from the analogy of how one makes a gospel presentation in England, that is, on the basis of what the person already knows: "We may argue with him from his own data." The primary difference is not in the fundamental approach, but in realizing that a non-European has a very different set of "data" from that of the Briton. Horne illustrates this by pointing to the particular dangers of preaching any sort of a "damnation" message to someone without a Christian background (79):

> We should therefore be careful, how we bring in our damnatory clauses prematurely, against a people, who are not acquainted with our principles, and who can form no estimate of the consequences of rejecting them.

Given a very limited "common ground" of "data" to start with need not preclude any gospel preaching, however. In light of this reality, Horne recommends that the missionary stick close to the core gospel of Jesus in his witness to the "heathens." He must not get drawn into

moralizing or defending peripheral issues.[1] "He should remember, that he is a preacher of the gospel, and that it is not so much moral truths, as gospel principles and motives that he is to instill into his auditors" (76).

Horne is particularly concerned that the missionary message not degenerate into a form of works righteousness, based on some new "Christian" ideal. Although he acknowledges the glories of Christian morality he warns that this is not the gospel that missionary has come to proclaim (76-77):

> So far from it [the gospel], that they, who have insisted upon it [morality], so as to obtain the name moral preachers, have in fact subverted the gospel, and broken the moral law into a thousand pieces, a few of which are gathered up, by those who mean to go to heaven by the merits of their works, and they consider themselves enriched by their par tial acquisitions.

The primary problem with this approach which focuses on changed behavior, or morals, apart from the gospel, is that it proposes to build a new building without a new foundation. The gospel is the essential foundation without which the challenge of Christlike morality becomes worse than meaningless; it is futile (77):

> Unless they [the missionaries] supply this defect, their boasted morals are good for nothing; and their zeal to do good a mere beating of the air. The gospel preacher supplies their defect, and both magnifies and establishes the law in all its extent and spirituality, by placing it on the glorious, everlasting foundation, of Christ crucified.

This emphasis in preaching seems to be the doctrinal equivalent of

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1. In this Horne is echoing some of Wesley's ealier advice (1788) to a young missionary to Nova Scotia, John Mann: "Keep to one point, Christ dying for us, and living in us; so will you fulfil [my] joy" (Jackson, Works 14:362).

laying good foundations in other areas such as language and culture learning. The same dangers exist when one tries to forge ahead without a proper base. Along the same lines, he warns against debating comparative understandings of ethics and virtue as a means of evangelism. "Justice, mercy, and truth, however we may differ in the application of the terms, are things, in which the heathen will think themselves as well informed as ourselves" (77). Once again the missionary is called back to his principle message: "the crucified Jesus is the central point from which all the lines of our divinity must be drawn" (78).

Horne realizes that even preaching a Christ-centered gospel and avoiding extraneous topics is not enough to guarantee a genuinely positive response. In fact, he warns against premature rejoicing over apparent "conversions." As missionaries "we should not commit ourselves to the dangers of an easy faith" (82). Horne shows a remarkable confidence in the durability of faith developing by grace, slowly and reflectively as it should. "Nor will the mind, inclining to conversion, and characterized by humility and earnestness, be discouraged by a prudent reserve in his instructor" (81). This seems remarkably congruent with Wesley's emphasis on strict spiritual examination and his reluctance to recognize a conversion that was not accompanied by distinguishing marks. Wesley also believed that salvation was a time-consuming process for most people, and that it was dangerous to rush it.

Horne had a remarkable sensitivity and respect for the dynamics of leadership within a culture, and the impact that a missionary presence might have upon the "chiefs." The gospel should never be presented in such a way as to threaten the existing governmental structures. That is

not its purpose. The missionary "must show that government has every thing to hope, and nothing to fear from religion" (83). Horne saw some of the greatest potential for missionary shipwreck in the manner with which it approached authority. While the gospel messengers dare not threaten existing structures, they must also show no sign of compromise to win the approval of the powerful.

> By affecting the favor of the great, we degrade our ministry, endanger our own salvation, and render the men we flatter and fawn, worse than they were before. Any extraordinary zeal to make noble proselytes indicates mercenary and ambitious views. The rich are no less sagacious than the poor in discovering the motive of our conduct. They accept our adulation, and despise us for it (83).

Again like Wesley, Horne emphasizes the absolute necessity of a holy life for the success of the missionary witness. This is the message most readily recognized by the person whom prevenient grace is preparing for repentance and faith.[1] Holiness is also the only legitimate power base for the missionary. "Piety and benevolence will command esteem, and give us all the influence we can want" (84). Not only will this attitude win esteem and spiritual authority, it will guard against one of the most common missionary pitfalls, "the usurpation of dominion over their flocks, and particularly the dominion of a secular kind."

On this topic Horne writes some of his strongest words: "Such

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1. Wesley firmly believed and stressed the alliance between the holiness of the messenger and the work of God in a person's life (Works 1:531):

> The beauty of holiness, of that inward man of the heart which is renewed after the image of God, cannot but strike every eye which God hath opened, every enlightened understanding.

conduct will merit the abhorrence of God and men: and must draw persecution on themselves." He warns against using the "specious pretext of civilization" to allow missionary authority to run beyond its rightful bounds. An equal temptation can come from "the ignorance, confidence, and docility of their converts," which seems to "throw into their hands a degree of power and influence, which are liable to the vilest abuse" (84). Horne never visualizes a situation where the missionary should assume any authority beyond the simple respect of the people born of their consistent exposure to his or her holy life. This is consistent with the conviction that salvation is a process of gracious, "assisting" persuasion that works with the wills and minds of persons, and never in an overpowering mode.

The preceding discussion has considered the motivational power of a deep confidence in God's universal prevenient grace. It has also looked at some of the methodological implications in Horne's mission theology which seems to take seriously existing cultures as grace-given settings for potential contact, without losing sight of the need for the gospel proclamation. In conclusion we will see how Horne dealt with the perennial question facing all missionary theologians; what about the fate of those who never hear the gospel? Doesn't the same grace save them as well, and if so, why missions?

The discussion of prevenient grace in chapter one considered Fletcher's extensive use of the "talent" metaphor to describe the nature of prevenient grace. Horne phrases the pointed question of those who never hear the gospel in terms of this same metaphor, making it all the more significant for this study (152):

> The death of Christ was a common sacrifice; his good spirit is given to all men; and if the heathen obey the admonitions of the Spirit, they will be accepted through the merits of the Redeemer's death. Why not, then, leave them to their equitable Judge, who, having given them but one talent, will not require of them the improvement of ten?

Horne answers the question in much the same way we would expect of Fletcher or Wesley. He acknowledges the fact that there exists a remote theoretical possibility that "a heathen may be saved without an explicit revelation of the gospel," on the basis of Christ's atoning sacrifice, in spite of his ignorance of it. But for Horne, this is very little consolation because it so reduces the full meaning of salvation by seeing it only in terms of one's eternal destiny. Like Wesley and Fletcher, for Horne, the power of salvation and the motive of mission is not so much the escape from hell as it is the deliverance from sin and its concomitant suffering here and now. Or more positively, the real motive for mission lies in the joyful experience of a living relationship with Jesus Christ and the fullness of the Holy Spirit with all his fruit.

Horne seems to have accepted the maximal view of present salvation which we saw earlier to be essential to a Wesleyan view of prevenient grace. The salvation for which prevenient grace is preliminary, and toward which it leads, is not simply the promise of heaven, but a saving relationship with Jesus accompanied by the power of victory over sin. So, Horne answers the question, "why missions?" with another question (153):

> If the blind may travel from one part of the kingdom to another, by the humble helps of his dog and staff, what can there be desirable in vision, and all the accommodations of inns, carriages, and good roads? Not to press my objector

> with a hundred more such questions, I affirm, that Christianity gives a perfection to man, which sets him almost on a level with the angels.

For the possibility of such a salvation ever to become an adequate motive for mission it would have to become the dominant living experience of the missionary himself. Horne emphasized the fact that a "stream can rise no higher than its source," and that the first need of the potentially missionary church may be its own conversion (68):

> Before we can justify sanguine hopes [of effective mission work], a considerable alteration in favor of religion must take place among ourselves. We cannot give to others what we do not possess; and before our zeal will acquire sufficient momentum to effect great things for the salvation of the heathen, it is necessary that a more general and serious care should prevail about the salvation of our own souls.

Unfortunately, Horne never had the opportunity to put his principles into practice on foreign soil. He remained in England serving several different appointments within the Anglican Church and vigorously supporting the missionary cause. His Letters were, however, highly influential in the life of Joshua Marsden, a Methodist missionary with a full career of ministry both on the frontier of North America, in the West Indies and Bermuda. Thomas Coke planned, supported and administrated Methodist missions. Melville Horne developed a practical mission theology for both motive and methods. But Joshua Marsden was able to become a missionary himself, and in spite of nearly broken health in the early days of his ministry, to follow his calling most of his life. The following chapter will consider a portion of Marsden's ministry as a case study in the actual practice of early Methodist missions.

CHAPTER 8

JOSHUA MARSDEN: A METHODIST MISSION CASE STUDY

Introduction

Joshua Marsden began his missionary career in 1800, sailing for Halifax, Nova Scotia (Marsden 1816:9). During the following twelve years he served frontier circuits in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick among English, French and Black American settlers. In 1808, his health severely damaged by eight years of exposure and rigorous travel, he was appointed to start a Methodist mission in Bermuda, then called the Somers Islands. The previous attempt in 1799 by one of Thomas Coke's appointees had failed completely, resulting in the trial and imprisonment of missionary John Stevenson and the entrenchment of strong anti-Methodist sentiments. At the time of his appointment Marsden's prospects were bleak (Marsden 1816:110-143). However, by the end of four years' ministry, Marsden had succeeded in establishing a healthy, self-sufficient, multi-racial Methodist society, complete with a network of schools, indigenous leadership and a fully integrated Methodist chapel (Marsden 1816:152-163).

Marsden left Bermuda in 1812, hoping to return home for the first time since his departure twelve years before. His plans were altered, however, by the outbreak of the War of 1812 which stopped commercial traffic between America and England. In 1814 he secured passage to

England by way of France, and in 1816 published the account of his missionary work from which the following case study has been drawn. It was sold under the lengthy, descriptive title, The Narrative of a Mission to Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and the Somers Islands, with a Tour to Lake Ontario, to which is added, The Mission, an Original Poem, with Copious Notes, Also, A brief Account of Missionary Societies, And Much More Interesting Information on Missions In General.

Among the valuable resources of this early missionary record, this study limits its attention to the four years of remarkable ministry which Marsden and his young family spent in Bermuda. This selection is made primarily because this segment best fits the common contemporary understanding of a "missionary" endeavor. As mentioned above, the Wesleyan perspective did not draw strong distinctions between missions and other aspects of ministry, yet Marsden was aware that within the general duties of all Methodist preachers some contexts had more of a missionary character than others.

In his introductory reflections, Marsden describes his concept of a hierarchy in the various "orders" of missionary work, starting with the most extreme cases of cross-cultural barriers and life-threatening hardship. The true missionary "is supposed to hazard his life by associating with Savages and Pagans; whose language he has to learn, and to whose manners he must, in some degree conform, that he may preach effectually the unsearchable riches of Christ" (iii). Marsden seems to be cautious lest he seem to elevate himself to a place among the ranks of men such as "Elliot, Brainerd, Vanderkemp, and Kircherer" by daring to call himself a missionary. By comparison to these Marsden "deems

himself a mere dwarf in Missionary stature" (iii, v). Clearly, some of this may be the customary self-deprecation of a writer about to tell his own story, yet it is still significant to see the categories which informed an early Methodist missionary's self-concept in the days when missionary identity was a hard thing to define.

In the circuit-riding of his Canadian ministry, Marsden considered himself a missionary, but of an "inferior order of Missions." This opinion was based the fact that he was "a preacher sent to a friendly colony, among those of his own nation and colour, and language, whose affairs having called them to a distant climate, still require the word of life and teachers from the parent country" (iv). Comparing himself to other "real" missionaries, he hardly felt he deserved the title since there was "no strange language to learn -- no fabric of Idolatry and Paganism to demolish -- no exposure of life among the treacherous Barbarians" (iv-v).

Although these categories did describe his former ministry in Nova Scotia, we will see that his work primarily among the Black slave population of Bermuda was of a very different character. Marsden showed remarkable sensitivity to the subtilties of initiating ministry within a stubborn, antagonistic English subculture in Bermuda. He also built a strong rapport within the Black community. More amazingly, he was able to then bring the two together within an indigenous Bermudian Methodist worship context completely their own. The English language common to both groups and himself, in no way lessened the cross-cultural dynamics of his work. And the fate of his predecessor surely counts for some of the danger ingredient Marsden saw as a part of "real" mission work.

In addition to these factors, the selection of the Bermuda appointment as the most "missionary" of Marsden's ministry clearly reveals certain criteria and agendas of a twentieth century observer. Foremost among these is the desire to bring Marsden's distinctive principles in action into a frame of reference which will allow contemporary application. Given the existing parallel challenges between Marsden's experience and some post-colonial mission contexts today, there appear to be enough similarities to warrant further exploration.

The following case study will look for the clues to Marsden's success. It will also try to see if there is anything in his methods uniquely linked to his Wesleyan theological roots, and particularly a strong concept of prevenient grace. Marsden was an unashamed, if not a "proud" Methodist. He had no doubt that Methodism was uniquely qualified to answer the missionary call of the world. Before moving to the particulars of his mission, let us hear Marsden's own Methodist missionary vision as he speaks in the third person for "the writer" (vi-vii):

> [H]e has heard it observed by persons not very friendly to the cause, when attempts to do good by others have failed, "why don't you get a Methodist preacher, he will succeed." Perhaps this may be considered as giving too much honour to the creature, but facts have justified the assumption, for there is a peculiar character in Methodist Missionaries, which, by the blessing of God, can hardly fail of success; activity, simplicity, and zeal, are the vehicles through which the purest truths are conveyed. These are simply that man is a fallen, miserable creature, and that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, which blessed facts are pressed home and insisted upon, till the Holy Spirit write them upon the heart and bring the miserable sinner to repentance and faith in the atoning blood of Christ. The economy of a Christian society, and an affectionate display of pastoral tenderness and care, bring forward the tender plants, till, as trees of righteousness, they bear fruit to God's glory.

The characteristic emphases of prevenient grace shine out of Marsden's words clearly; the universal saving will and provision of God in the face of total human need, the role of the Holy Spirit mediating that grace and working through human instruments to bring the person first to repentance and then faith, the centrality of the atonement, and the necessity for nurture and gradual growth in community. How did Marsden put these principles into practice?

The Bermuda Methodist Mission, 1808-1812

In 1609 an English ship wrecked on the rocks around Bermuda. The sailors found the resources of the islands so plentiful and the climate so congenial that following their safe return to New England in 1610 there began a gradual settlement and colonization process. Marsden reports that most of the settlers were from Presbyterian or Dissenting churches; a few were Anglicans. However, by the late 1700's Bermuda's spiritual condition was in extreme neglect (118-119):

> [D]arkness and sin spread their desolations throughout every part of the otherwise lovely domain. It is true there was one church in each parish, with three clergymen belonging to the establishment; and also a Presbyterian minister, who preached at a small church, in Heron bay: notwithstanding which, the parishes, in general, were only favoured with one sermon every fourth sabbath, and even to this scanty morsel of the bread of life, many of the poor black and coloured people had no access.

In 1798, Bermuda caught the attention of Coke as its condition stood in stark contrast to the revival spreading throughout the West

Indies. His particular concern was for the Black population,[1] and looking primarily toward their evangelization, he sent John Stevenson in 1799 as missionary. At that time, shortly after the outlawing of the slave trade, nothing could have been more repugnant and threatening to the white Bermudian population than the evangelization of their now-endangered labor force. Stevenson had walked into a hornet's nest of opposition which eventually drove him from the islands. From one perspective the timing of his mission could not have been worse (121):

> It was a perilous moment for the friends of the Africans, as, at this period, many who owned slaves, were smarting under the abolition of this inhuman traffic, which had recently taken place, and were not fully without their fears of the further interference of the British legislature, in behalf of this injured portion of the human family. Slavery is as jealous of its power as freedom is of its liberty; hence, whoever touches that, touches the apple of the planter's eye.

Using the fact of Stevenson's lack of formal education and recognized ordination as a pretext for persecution, the Bermudian legislature passed a bill "to exclude all persons pretending, or having pretended, to be ministers of the gospel, or Missionaries from any religious society whatever, and not regularly invested with holy orders . . . from propagating any doctrine upon the gospel or otherwise" (123). Stevenson felt conscience bound to disobey the ordinance. He was promptly

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1. Marsden (119):

> In 1798, the moral state of these islands became an object of the solicitude of that great and successful Missionary, Dr. Thomas Coke, and from that time, his care never abated until in 1799, he, in conjunction with the conference, sent Mr. John Stephenson to act as Missionary, and preach the gospel chiefly to the black and coloured people, -- a race of men, for whom Dr. Coke manifested the truest regard.

jailed for six months and fined fifty pounds for his efforts. Carving his own defense in the prison cell floor with his knife, Stevenson wrote: "John Stevenson, Methodist Missionary, was imprisoned in this jail six months, for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ to the poor negroes" (127).

This was the foundation laid for Marsden when he received his commission from Coke in 1808.[1] It is not surprising that he and his wife immediately set aside every Friday until their departure for fasting and prayer (129). Marsden described the news as "an appointment that was as unwelcome to the flesh and blood as 'smoke to the eyes, or vinegar to the teeth'" (129). Yet, it seems that Marsden's eight year apprenticeship in Nova Scotia had specially prepared him for the challenges of his new task, perhaps in a way similar to the painful preparation of the situation in Bermuda provided by his predecessor.

His reply to Coke was energetic, and full of hope that God would be laying the right foundation for his witness (Marsden 1808:334):

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1. Marsden had written to the conference requesting leave from Nova Scotia for the sake of his health. He had, however, mentioned his willingness to minister for a while in Bermuda. The conference chose the latter option. Here is Coke's response (111):

> Liverpool, August 7th, 1807
>
> My very dear Brother,
>
> I am in the midst of the hurry of Conference business. You see by the enclosed minutes that you have been appointed for Bermuda; set off as soon as you possibly can, and draw on me from time to time for what you want, at the Rev. Robert Lomas's, New Chapel, City Road London. My love to brother Black, as well as the other prechers. God bless you.
>
> I am, my dear Brother,
> Yours affectionately and faithfully,
> Thomas Coke

> When I think of the forlorn condition of the Bermudians, my heart longs to be with them, to preach the precious gospel of my Lord and Master in that island. O that the God of Abraham may send me good speed, and prepare the people for the reception of his dear Son's gospel, that you may have cause to rejoice in your exertions to supply Bermuda with a missionary.

No doubt these were cheering words to the missionary statesman. However, by the time of their arrival at port in Bermuda, Marsden plainly admits he had no hope of success. "I knew not a single person; and was come upon an unwelcome errand." The description of his first venture ashore captures some of the dynamics of the situation (132-133):

> I enquired, in vain, for Methodists; -- the hated sound seemed to startle even some who appeared as if they wished to show me civility if I had come upon another errand: as a tumbler, buffoon, dancing master, or conjurer, I might have been welcome; but to preach the gospel, yea, and to preach the gospel to negroes: this shut up every avenue of civility, and rendered my person as forbidding, as my errand was disagreeable.

Marsden finally found one old Methodist man on a neighboring island, -- apparently the last survivor of the earlier persecution -- but the condition of this fellow only deepened his despair. "I returned to St. George with a heavy heart, not without frequent starting, tears, and mingled desires to change my gloomy and unpleasant situation for the quiet of the grave" (133). Adding to his concern was the safety and comfort of his wife, "far advanced in her pregnancy," and seventeen-month-old daughter still staying aboard the ship because he could find no housing ashore.[1] Sympathizing with his situation, the captain of-

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1. It is noteworthy to recognize the source of support acknowledged by Marsden and his wife during these first difficult days (134):

> We looked into the comforting book, not for entertainment,

fered to take them on to the Bahamas and back to Nova Scotia, "adding in his honest and blunt manner, 'they are not worthy of a Missionary; -- let them die in their sins'" (135).

Marsden declined the offer, and shortly began to see signs of light. A letter of recommendation from a British Colonel -- recently converted under Methodist ministry in Nova Scotia -- provided Marsden access to the governor of Bermuda who assured him "he would do all in his power to further my mission, for the sake of his friend Colonel Bayard" (135-136). After conferring with the attorney-general and chief justice (who was very reluctant to accept Marsden's credentials) the governor gave him provisional permission to proceed with his preaching until further notice. That same day "an unknown friend" found two rooms available in the house of a "man of colour" (136). He moved in immediately, and asked his new landlord to give notice of the first preaching service scheduled for the next day.

The first Methodist congregation consisted of no more than ten, including Mrs. Marsden, "the [ship's] captain, the mate, the supercargo and his wife, the rest were black and coloured persons" (137). But by

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.Continued.

> nor yet for mere profit, but as a pilot in a storm looks at a chart, to find an opening among the rocks, or a passage through the dreadful shoal, that he may escape the shipwreck with which he is threatened. And for ever be the Deliverer praised, all the scriptures to which we were directed, greatly alleviated the exercises of our minds, as well as cast some light upon our stay. Although flesh and blood solicited to abandon the mission as hopeless.

then Marsden was prayerfully hopeful (143): [1]

> I continued to labour with many prayers and fears; and though my prospects of doing good to the whites were rather gloomy, yet a glimmering of extensive usefulness among the black and coloured people often revived my spirits and cheered my path. My little domestic congregation [they met in one of Marsden's two rented rooms] continued to increase, so that by the time I had preached six weeks, the six who first attended, were multiplied to sixty, and some of these afforded signs that the word was not as chaff blown away by the wind of carelessness.

It is interesting to see Marsden's manner of discerning signs of spiritual awakening. He apparently made no strong evangelistic appeal, rather he noticed those among the attenders who stayed later than others in prayer, or who seemed most interested in the preaching. These he would "speak to . . . concerning their souls." The first converts were two women who came to him "and after some hesitation, informed me that they wished me to direct them how they might save their souls." Marsden expressed his joy in the language of the growth metaphors reminiscent of Coke and Wesley. "These first buddings of a gracious nature . . . were as pleasing to my heart as the reviving sun to a Greenlander" (144).

The next converts were "Tony Burges, a venerable old black man," and his wife. Their children soon "followed the example of their parents, until the whole family was drawn to God." A neighbor, Sally Tucker was next. She was followed by the Marsden's "coloured" landlord, Mellory and his wife (144). The impact was not limited to the Black portion of the congregation. Marsden mentions several other white young

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1. He comforted himself in his small beginnings by remembering that "the Methodists, who are now [1816] between four and five hundred thousand strong, eighty years ago consisted of no more that six or eight young men, in one of the colleges at Oxford" (138-139).

men and the three daughters of a sea captain, all of which, with the first Black converts, were to make up the first Methodist society (145):

> All became close attenders of the preaching, and were graciously drawn to a serious and impartial inquiry after divine things; these, with many others whom I could name, inclining in the same way, and becoming reformed and serious, I formed into a little society, reading the rules, and pointing out to them the nature of each, for all this was new and interesting respecting Christian fellowship; -- this was the first Methodist society ever raised up in the Somers Islands, about forty in number.

Marsden's joy in this speedy response among his hearers in this seemingly hopeless setting was understandably exuberant (145):

> I rejoiced over them as a tender father over a first-born son; the seed that was sown in tears I now began to reap in joy; the design of Providence began to unfold itself in my appointment to the island, and I no longer walked with my book in my hand through the cedar trees and by the sea side as a solitary and mournful exile, unconnected and alone in the islands.

The formation of the society, in addition to the congregation, called for specific pastoral attention. Marsden intentionally restricted himself to "the little town of St. George." He began a program of house-to-house visitation in which he combined pastoral care and practical literacy efforts.[1] It was a time of building the deep, well-rounded relationships that characterized his ministry for the next four years.

During this time he also made trips to some of the communities on neighboring islands, preaching where he could among the small Anglican

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1. Marsden (145):

> I visited the blacks in their own houses; gave those who were beginning to learn to read, little pamphlets and tracts; prayed with them, and sometimes partook of the little social refreshments they with the greatest neatness, cleanliness and cordiality, set before me.

congregations. By comparison with his fervent congregation in St. George, Marsden's ministry with these was pale (145):

> My congregations were respectable people, who treated me with attention, politeness and hospitality; but alas! they had need of nothing: they were too polite to treat me rudely, too complaisant to gainsay, and too innocent, moral, and good to need a Saviour.

In spite of initial apathy, Marsden adopted a method calculated to win the hearts of the Anglican whites. Right in line with Horne's recommendations, he began by preaching in terms of the "data" familiar to them all, namely the primary faith affirmations of the Church of England. He also attended the Anglican services whenever he could (146). Gradually and gently Marsden won their confidence, and even some of their support (147):

> By these means, their prepossessions against us as a body, gave way, and many respectable people expressed themselves as glad that I had come to the islands: Stowe Wood, Esq. a respectable magistrate, invited me to his house, as did also Captain Walker, Mr. White, and Captain Newbold, and a number of others.

Immediately following this progress report, however, Marsden writes the following, indicative of his ministerial priorities, "Meanwhile, I omitted no opportunity to bring forward my little black and coloured flock in St. George" (147). Here is a clear example of the effective pastoral combination of the "flea" and "louse" characteristics, of Coke and Wesley (supra 129). Marsden had learned in his struggles on the Nova Scotia circuits the desperate need of Christians for effec-

tive pastoral care and nurture (51-56).[1] While reaching out to new areas, he was intent on "keeping" what he had already gained. To this end he began serious efforts in literacy training in order to provide the new society with the means for its own support in the Scriptures (148).

He also lost no opportunity to build the self-esteem of the recently-liberated former slaves. In his visitation he provided scripture portions and Testaments to those who were showing progress in their reading. He also composed "a little pamphlet of hymns" designed especially to encourage the faith and confidence of the Black Christians.[2] As might be expected, these efforts to strengthen the Black population met with mixed responses among the White population.

The use of certain "freedom" metaphors in the hymns led some to fear a violent uprising (157). Also the mixed worship services in the cramped quarters of Marsden's apartment, drove some of the Whites away. Yet the work was allowed to go on, in spite of periodic opposition. The society at St. George remained racially integrated, though the Whites were in the minority. At the time, such membership for white

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1. Marsden (53):

> Methodism has been a peculiar blessing to this new world, where, having no religous establishment, many of the people would be left to contingent religious instrcution, had not the Methodist preachers, with alacrity and zeal not unworthy the apostolic age, spread themselves abroad in every direction, and becoming every man's servant for Christ's sake, and every settlements's apostle in the blessed gospel.

2. The text of one of the hymns is transcribed in Appendix D. This hymn is particulary relavent to this study as it is an affirmation of the extent of God's saving grace.

Bermudians was a form of social suicide, and so indicated a high degree of commitment. Marsden commented, "Indeed, joining the society in Bermuda at this time seemed like changing cast[e] in the East Indies, so that none who set much value upon the opinions of others durst come among us" (159-150).

Leaders and preachers began to emerge from the society. Men such as the Marsdens' landlord, Mellory, and another, Peter Hubbert, assumed pastoral responsibility early on, allowing Marsden to travel and to preach in more of the island communities (150-151). In these he met with mixed responses, however, among the most receptive areas was the town of Hamilton. Ironically this town had been the center of John Stevenson's earlier persecution. There he rented a large room for preaching, and it was quickly filled beyond its capacity. Among the fruit of this particular effort were "several respectable white females [who] were deeply impressed with a lively concern for experimental religion." Two of these, incidentally, married Methodist missionaries, and in Marsden's words now "adorn the precious gospel" (151).

The time seemed to have come to raise money for a proper Methodist chapel, not only for the sake of needed space, but also to ensure a meeting place that could not be effected by any racial bars. Marsden interpreted the resounding success of this project as a profound endorsement of the Methodist ministry in Bermuda, given the tremendous odds against its success. The wealthy white Bermudians who had in the last generation jailed the Methodist missionary gave generously.

Marsden was so energized by the project that his previous lung ailments which had driven him from Nova Scotia no longer bothered

him (153):

> I never had better health in my whole life: the people wondered, and said my constitution must be like iron, as most of the weather was burning hot, and compelled others to take refuge in the shade, while I had often to spend from nine to twelve hours a day, exposed to the range (sic) of the almost vertical sun; and then hasten to some appointment to preach, returning home so exhausted as hardly able to pull off my clothes, and rising with new vigor, to pursue the same toil.

In this same exhilarated mood, Marsden greeted the completion of the chapel and his first sermon from its pulpit (152-153):

> [T]hus after preaching two years from house to house in a sultry climate, I had at length the happiness to ascend a pulpit, and proclaim to four or five hundred people who had met at the opening, "This none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." I now also realized one of the nearest objects to my heart, that of having a spot in the centre of the Islands, where the neglected Africans might be raised to the dignity of worshiping God, without being separated from their fellow men like cattle in a stall.

The rest of the story of the Methodist mission is characterized by the expansion of the work already established. Marsden, and the local lay preachers continued to minister throughout the islands. With an eye toward the future, Marsden especially focused on providing for schools and training primarily in reading. He also began lectures in doctrine for the more serious members of the society, with the goal of ensuring the continuation of the work. This was a priority which apparently was not shared by his successors (153):

> My heart being set upon the prospect of doing the blacks and coloured people some lasting good, I set apart one evening every week to instruct as many of them as could possibly attend in the most important and fundamental doctrines of the gospel; [adding in regretful retrospect] and I am persuaded that if this method had been continued by my successors, the society would not have fallen away from 136 to 68.

By the time he wrote this account Marsden had opportunity to hear

what had become of the work he left behind.

After a wrenching farewell (160-162), he left the core society of a strong 136 members, with many times more than that participating in regular worship. Although he claimed in retrospect that had he been more "faithful in the improvement of every opening and the discharge of every duty," their number might have been five hundred, he was by no means discouraged about the prospects of Methodism in Bermuda. He left strong indigenous leaders, and counted on the arrival of other missionaries to replace him.

Looking back on his departure he summarized the four years (162):

> Bermuda was a little world to me; I had gone there a despised and unendeared man; God had given me friends, respect, a chapel, a society, a love for the place, and all that could render parting and separation painful in the extreme. Many, of both the blacks and the whites, manifested the most poignant grief: they wept aloud, and strongly reminded me of St. Paul's departure from the church of Ephesus, "and they all wept sore, and fell upon St. Paul's neck and kissed him, sorrowing most of all for the words which he spake, that they should see his face no more; and they accompanied him to the ship.

Summary and Conclusion

Part two has looked at some of the missionary vision and practice that came out of the Wesleyan revival. Its purpose was to seek clarification of our understanding of prevenient grace by tracing it in practical expression in early Methodist missions. Whatever success was realized must be evaluated within the context of some very challenging, and at times threatening factors in the process of researching this particular phase of Methodist story. This task was complicated by the

problem of defining unique Methodist identity among the powerful surge of mixed evangelical energy that effected most of the churches of the late eighteenth-century England.[1] The political and economic turmoil of the period further obscured the purely theological component of mission motivation and practice that we were trying to focus upon. Added to this was the uniquely "Methodist" confusion and the bids for power that formed in the vacuum of Wesley's absence from the controls after 1791.

In spite of these challenges there is clear evidence of the profound significance of the doctrine of prevenient grace for the motivation behind missions. The theological possibility of global human salvation empowered even members of those traditions for whom it was doctrinally inconsistent (Semmel 1973:151-152). This theme was the unmistakably common thread between running through Wesley, Coke, Horne and Marsden. Neither can its significance as the essential factor for all evangelical mission theology of that era be denied.

Directly related to the universal aspect of prevenient grace is a radically egalitarian emphasis in Wesleyan theology. Although Wesley balanced this with his commitment to be loyal to existing structures of church and state, it did not prevent active campaigns against slavery and other discriminatory components of his cultural-political context. Nowhere are the missionary implications of the egalitarian aspect of prevenient grace more clearly seen than in the ministry of Joshua

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1. One of the clearest overview condensations of these dynamics can be found in Part V of E. Gordon Rupp's Religion in England, 1688-1791, entitled simply, "The Evangelical Revival" (1986:325-490).

Marsden among former slaves in Bermuda (see Appendix D).

In addition to the constant, continuous character of prevenient grace which flows transcending time from the Atonement, this doctrine also seems to account in the mind of Methodist missionaries for some of the more particular dynamics of God's providence. A key part of Wesleyan missionary strategy was the belief that at distinct times, in specific places, and among certain peoples God's grace prepares a harvest moment which must not be missed by his harvesters. This is not to say that ministry needs to be limited to only such contexts, but that missionaries should try to find where these ripe fields are and align their resources according to where God's presence is most keenly felt. Prevenient grace not only prepares individual hearts for repentance, it engineers circumstances for corporate receptivity. Although each of the three missionaries considered acknowledged this dynamic, Coke seemed driven by its power most of all. If he ever erred in judgment in deploying missionaries, it was in seeing fruit as ripe before its time, never from having let it go to seed without his attention.

Less clear, but still visible are the methodological implications of the doctrine of prevenient grace. In addition to motivating missionary concern for all peoples of all the world, it also had the power to guide missionary policy. In Wesley's vision there is a clear connection between his concept of the "heart-to-heart" and "house-to-house" "spread" of the gospel and his confidence in role prevenient grace in that process. For Wesley the primary instruments of mission were the transformed lives of Christians in daily interaction with others. The grace that was universally at work in all persons would be stimulated

by this contact. Wesley had great confidence in the redeeming resonance between a witness's holy life and "the law written on [seekers'] hearts." It is no accident that laymen were the driving force of Methodist expansion.

Similarly, the Wesleyan emphasis on nurture and pastoral care, which gave birth to both the itinerant circuit system and the corporate forms of discipleship, is directly related to Wesley's dynamic concept of prevenient grace as it functions in the larger process of salvation. This grace was always a "leading" grace, designed to take persons ever deeper and higher in their love and spirituality. It was also an "assisting" grace, which is not sufficient in itself to overpower the human will, or to accomplish its goal in isolation from others. Therefore, if the missionary task is essentially to work in conjunction with prevenient grace to lead people to salvation, it could never be satisfied with a mission goal short of a fully developed, reproductive, cohesive community of believers. The goal was the establishment of an evangelizing/discipling process, not the mere conversion of heathen sinners into "Christians." As seen in Melville Horne's advice, these priorities naturally acknowledged existing social and cultural patterns of community living and leadership. They also helped define the role of the missionary as the process catalyst, not leader.

The doctrine of prevenient grace also has the potential to guide the message of the missionary. In Wesley, Horne, and Marsden there is a consistent emphasis on the person and saving acts of Christ, and an avoidance of all other peripheral issues. The fact that the missionary is in fundamental partnership with the Holy Spirit's mediation of pre-

venient grace disciplines the missionary message to that which is compatible with the "inward witness." Missionaries can expect the most opposition when these two components are out of harmony with each other.

This universal grace-given spiritual awakening, so crucial to the ability to receive the offered gospel, also sensitizes even non-Christians to the spiritual realities in the lives of the missionaries. Therefore, congruence between the missionary's message and character is essential. Wesley, Horne and Marsden, once again concur on the absolute priority of a holy, consistent life for any who would be missionaries.

Finally, the fact that prevenient grace's awakening and instructing effects are universal encourages in missionaries a high degree of openness and attentiveness to what is already taking place in any person or context, in spite of the fact that this existing condition is in need of radical rebirth and transformation. Horne put this into the most practical expression in his prescription that the first two years of any missionary effort be spent in listening and learning. Given the eternally significant implications of such a delay in evangelism, only a substantial doctrine of prevenient grace could justify such a policy.

More will be said on each of these points in the following chapter when we try to bring these considerations into contemporary application. To this point this study has been concerned first to verify the first chapter's theological formulation of prevenient grace as Christo-centric and utterly undeserved, yet universally redeeming, revealing, liberating, and drawing persons through infinitely creative means to its fulfillment in experientially-realized and socially-expressed salvation. Nothing observed in Wesley, Coke, Horne, or Marsden has contradicted

this understanding. In fact, much in their lives and writings support and amplify it. Second, this chapter has demonstrated the primary significance of the doctrine of prevenient grace such that it would be difficult to account for the peculiarities of Wesleyan missions apart from it. Third, in the process of the first two considerations, this overview of early Methodist missions has shown some of the distinctive marks of prevenient grace in practice; there are likely many more.

This study so far strengthens confidence in the biblical and experiential integrity of the doctrine of prevenient grace. It also reveals some of its practical, cross-cultural applicability in diverse ministry situations. With this base, we are now ready to ask the question, what does the Wesleyan concept of prevenient grace have to offer contemporary mission theology and practice?

PART III

PREVENIENT GRACE AND WORLD MISSIONS TODAY

CHAPTER 9

WESLEY AND THE CONTEMPORARY MISSIOLOGICAL DIALOGUE: CLARIFYING KEY TERMINOLOGY

Introduction

Part one proposed a working definition of prevenient grace using theological and experiential categories. This definition was drawn from the primary doctrinal sources of the Methodist revival, including Wesley's sermons, and the interpretive efforts of John Fletcher. It was also based upon a selection and synthesis of more contemporary scholarly interpretations, evaluated in light of Wesley's own spiritual pilgrimage. The purpose of part one was to try to get a clear idea of prevenient grace as John Wesley proposed the doctrine, in order to have a better foundation for later considerations of how it influenced the practice of ministry and missions within the Wesleyan revival.

Part two focused on the early Methodist missionary endeavors, particularly those undertaken in the later years of the revival and immediately following Wesley's death. This overview and analysis proposed to augment the more theoretical definition of prevenient grace offered in chapter one, by tracing some of its practical implications for early Methodist mission work. In the process, some key principles for

mission theology and practice seemed to emerge which had direct connection with the doctrine of prevenient grace.

Part three will build on the foundation of parts one and two in order to address the implications of prevenient grace for contemporary missiological concerns. More specifically, it will focus on the questions concerning God's previous work in the collective experience of all persons living within various contextual matrices. The approach combines both the doctrinal and historical emphases of parts one and two.

As discussed in the introductory chapter, missionary theology and methods are powerfully impacted by how one interprets human contexts in light of the Gospel, and by how one interprets the Gospel in light of human contexts. The interrelationship between the two is very tight and complex. Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace seems particularly suited to address the question of how what is found in present human experience relates to God's revealed plan of salvation. It presupposes that in every person, in every context, God has been active in a way consistent with his ultimate goals for humanity; and, that a significant part of all human experience can only be interpreted in terms of the various human responses to this previous divine activity.[1] This affirmation, and the manner in which it appeared to guide the Methodist revival, suggest its potential for contemporary applications as well.

If, as Wesley believed, prevenient grace is part of the experience

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1. Max Stackhouse (1988:12) seems to share a similar perspective when he states, "[E]very context is a particular manifestation of the human condition, which cannot be understood without reference to God, God's laws, God's purpose, and God's love which transcends every context and every social hermeneutic."

of all persons, then this universal gift of God must have collective, as well as individual, impact. If all persons are in some attitude and degree of response to the redemptive purposes of prevenient grace, then this factor should be acknowledged in any attempt to interpret the various configurations and dynamics of human relatedness. And, if prevenient grace is the essential, previous work of God, preparing all persons, in all contexts, to receive the good news of Christ and to experience saving faith, then there is no dynamic more significant for the mission of the church in global witness.

In light of these hypotheses, part one is an attempt to bring the principles of prevenient grace into the complicated, and often confusing, interface between theology and the "contextual sciences" -- all those disciplines which seek to map and interpret the contours of collective human experience.

Specifically, this will involve exploring the following questions: 1) How does the doctrine of prevenient grace influence the way contexts are defined, understood and evaluated? 2) How does it inform our concepts of individual persons within these contexts? 3) How does the explicit Gospel message relate to the previous implicit work of God within all contexts? 4) How does prevenient grace address the dynamics of continuity and discontinuity within the goal-oriented redemptive purposes of God? 5) What might be a Wesleyan concept of redemption or salvation at a societal or context-wide level? 6) What are the practical implications of a Wesleyan view of contextually sensitive ministry today?

Before addressing these questions about the doctrine of prevenient

grace, it is important to recognize the distinctive holism of Wesley's "practical divinity" (Baker 1987). Although Wesley's writings are often the source of superficial allusions within contemporary literature, seldom are his concepts duly treated with an adequate appreciation or understanding of his whole theology. This can lead to misunderstandings and confusion. Therefore, chapter nine will address the manner in which Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace is tightly interwoven with his more fundamental concepts of original sin, the atonement, the nature of saving faith and goal of full salvation.

These are all terms used freely and frequently in missiological dialogue, and in most cases the clarity of their meaning seems taken for granted. For example, Max Stackhouse argues convincingly for the need to define "context," but seems to assume that the meaning of "faith" is understood.[1] As this study of Wesley's theology will show, there are behind common theological terms, like faith, a wide variety of interpretations.

This complicates the contemporary application of one particular aspect of Wesley's theology, such as the doctrine of prevenient grace. Prevenient grace, as Wesley understood it, is not compatible with many commonly held concepts of sin, faith, and salvation. Therefore, to try to apply it within an alien conceptual framework would yield a distortion. Put another way, it seems that in following Wesley's path one must start where he starts or quickly lose the trail.

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1. "Whether we are going to contextualize the faith, or try to understand the contextual nature of our faith, we shall have to know what a context is" (Stackhouse 1988:10).

For the purposes of this study it is not necessary to accept all of Wesley's theology, or to agree with his particular definition of key theological terms. However, it is important to recognize that the doctrine of prevenient grace is an integral part of a larger whole. Therefore, any authentic application of such a key principle as prevenient grace will be limited to the degree to which there is agreement on his more fundamental points of doctrine.

In light of these considerations, this last of three parts begins with what may seem a rather lengthy caveat in chapter nine, looking particularly at Wesley's understanding of "saving faith" and its fruits as the goal of prevenient grace. Among the other variously interpreted theological terms, Wesley's distinctive experience and understanding of faith is foundational to all aspects of his theology after 1738. Seeing faith as an experientially realized gift from God, instead of a conscious choice by a free willing agent, clearly sets Wesley apart from the majority of contemporary interpretations. But, more importantly, it is the key to understanding the very specific function of prevenient grace as Wesley conceived it.

In its essentially preparatory character, prevenient grace is defined primarily by its goal. If the doctrine of prevenient grace is separated from Wesley's understanding of faith it loses its distinctive Wesleyan character. For this reason, although this is not a formal study in Wesley's understanding of faith, it is essential to stake down that anchor point securely. Otherwise, prevenient grace becomes the designation for simply anything which leads to the many various concepts of God's redemptive goals for humanity. Our purpose is to be more

specific.

Summary. Bracketing any reservations about Wesley's theological starting points for the moment, part three will try to follow the implications of his doctrine of prevenient grace along the trajectory on which it was launched, in order to see what it may have to offer today. Chapter ten will suggest some implications of Wesley's concept of prevenient grace at a conceptual level, especially as it relates to the way we interpret human contextuality. Chapter eleven will then focus on the way in which these concepts seem validated and illustrated Wesley's approach to ministry among people of his day in a wide variety of social, cultural, racial and economic contexts. In conclusion, chapter twelve will attempt to synthesize the implications of Wesley's approach to contextually sensitive ministry within the multiple contexts of the contemporary "world parish." One particular concern will be the to explore the integration of the various "contextual sciences" within a missiological perspective based on Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace.

Holism of Wesley's *Ordo Salutis*

As discussed in detail in chapter one, the doctrine of prevenient grace for Wesley was an essential part of his understanding of the way persons move from their original state of guilt, sin, and separation from God into a saving relationship with Him built on faith. The following section takes a more detailed look at the significance of this theological context of the doctrine of prevenient grace.

Wesley's understanding of this process of salvation was dynamic.

It began with God's previous work in all persons throughout human history, and proceeds today within a dialogue of ongoing human acceptance or rejection of grace. Within each person the continuous character of this salvation process is marked with decisive moments of divine-human "contact" and resulting transformation. However, it is never finished until death brings glorification in heaven. As with most other aspects of Wesley's theology, the essential meaning of prevenient, or "preventing" grace is found in relation to this salvation process.[1] In the following quotation Wesley summarizes his views (Works 3:203):

> Salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) preventing grace; including the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against him. All these imply some tendency toward life; some degree of salvation; the beginning of deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God, and the things of God. Salvation is carried on by convincing grace, usually in Scripture termed repentance; which brings a larger measure of self-knowledge, and a farther deliverance from the heart of stone. Afterwards we experience the proper Christian salvation; whereby, "through grace," we "are saved by faith"; consisting of those two grand branches, justification and sanctification.

The ultimate goal of prevenient grace, this side of death, is the "experience" of "proper Christian salvation," with its "two grand branches, justification and sanctification." However, its more immediate goal is faith, the unique means by which one experiences this salvation. More immediate still is that repentance which precedes the gift of faith.

From one perspective, then, prevenient grace can be defined by its ultimate goal. However, this goal is reached only through a series of

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1. Frank Baker has called Wesley "a specialist in the doctrines of sin and salvation" (1987:9).

specific events in a person's spiritual journey. It is not specific enough, therefore, to speak of prevenient grace as simply the initiatives of God which lead a person to salvation, although this statement is true in itself. Salvation for Wesley depends on saving faith; saving faith, on true repentance; and, true repentance, on receptivity to prevenient grace. In other words, prevenient grace realizes its goal through a specific pattern of events, which, in the normal flow of the ordo salutis, cannot be excepted.[1] As such, it is crucial to understand the character of these intermediate steps in order to understand the real functional significance of prevenient grace for contemporary application.

From the start one cannot assume that universal categories exist. In missiological literature there are as many concepts of salvation as there are concepts of ultimate human need -- the thing or things from which persons most seem to need saving. This is especially true in light of contemporary approaches to theology which ask each context to define its own primary needs. These needs then outline their own concept of salvation, with its own functional locus of saving "faith." Bypassing an interesting discussion on the problem of soteriological pluralism (Braaten 1980: 24-29), it is important only to note that this kind of approach in missiology can quickly disintegrate dialogue into exclusivistic debates over relevant categories (Stackhouse 1988:8-10).

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1. For a more detailed analysis of this salvation process, refer to Wesley's sermon on "The Scripture Way of Salvation" (Works 2:153). Series editor, Albert C. Outler, describes this as "the most successful summary of the Wesleyan vision of the ordo salutis in the entire sermon corpus" (Works 2:154).

Without a mutually held starting point, the dialogue can not go much further than comparing or arguing over ideas.

Of course Wesley had a distinct starting point of his own, and to be authentically "Wesleyan" in application one must begin with his understanding of salvation. The present task is not to critique Wesley's theology, but to see if it has anything to offer missiology today. Without attempting to discern whether or not Wesley's ideas and interpretations of Scripture were so contextually enmeshed as to be only of historical interest, it is necessary simply to start where he did. "We cannot accept the rules of a dialogue which requires us to remain silent about what lies at the core of [his] movement" (Braaten 1980:21-22).

In addressing this theological "core," Carl Braaten distinguishes between two ways to speak of salvation, "phenomenologically and theologically" (1980:24). The phenomenological approach, like that mentioned above, looks at existing needs and posits a concept of salvation. The theological approach is not so open-ended. It is determined by the primary concepts of need and salvation as defined in Scripture. The theological approach is not as confident that observing human experience alone will raise the most significant questions of divine-human relationship.

While Braaten implies a dichotomy between these two approaches, for Wesley the two were complementary. Although he built his life and theology on Scripture, Wesley took experience very seriously. He was convinced that the two were absolutely harmonious when properly understood. Much of his creative theology was born of his tenacity to find

essential congruence between Scripture and real life -- in that order.

Summary. Wesley saw all parts of his theology in relation to the whole. This whole is defined primarily by its goal; a goal that could only be reached by a life-long process of faithful response to grace. Therefore, in a very real sense the process of salvation itself became the goal. For Wesley, Scripture, defined 1) the essential starting point, 2) the decisive transition points, and 3) the goal(s) of this process. For this reason it is essential to understand how Wesley interpreted the Bible on these issues, and how he saw Scripture and experience in harmony.

Presupposition of Original Sin

Wesley's understanding of human sin as the primary problem and origin of all human need was both theological and phenomenological. Or, perhaps more accurately, it was first theological and then phenomenological. Wesley could compare the scripturally implicit doctrine of Original Sin with ordinary, daily life experience, and find essential agreement. However, he readily acknowledged that such agreement is not necessarily obvious to those who are deceived by sin, and blinded to the most essential truths of life by its universal reality-veiling influence.[1] Wesley believed that experience was reliable, but without proper

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1. Quoting from Wesley's sermon on "Original Sin" (Works 2:176):

> From all these [scripture references] we learn concerning man in his natural state, unassisted by the grace of God, that "all the imaginations of the thoughts of his heart" are still "evil, only evil", and that "continually".
>
> And this account of the present state of man is confirmed

interpretation it may not always speak for itself. Particularly in things of spiritual significance, a supernaturally restored vision may be required. This proviso indicates the primacy of his theological assumptions.

That the orthodox concept of original sin was for Wesley a fundamental component of his theology can be readily seen from his own words (Works 2:183):

> This [doctrine of original sin], therefore, is the first, grand, distinguishing point between heathenism and Christianity. The one acknowledges that many men are infected with many vices, and even born with a proneness to them; but supposes withal that in some the natural good much overbalances the evil. The other declares that all men are "conceived in sin," and "shapen in wickedness," that hence there is in every man a "carnal mind which is enmity against God, which is not, cannot be, subject to his law," and which so infects the whole soul that "there dwelleth in him, in his flesh," in his natural state, "no good thing"; but "all the imagination of the thoughts of his heart is evil," only evil, and that continually.

In making this statement, Wesley realizes that he is cutting against the grain of popular opinion, but he remains steadfast in his commitment to Scripture even so (Works 2:173):

> [I]t is now quite unfashionable . . . to say anything to the disparagement of human nature; which is generally allowed, notwithstanding a few infirmities, to be very innocent and wise and virtuous.
>
> But in the meantime, what must we do with our Bibles? For they will never agree with this.

Wesley's understanding of original sin is clearly fundamental

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.Continued

> by daily experience. It is true that natural man discerns it not. And this is not to be wondered at. So long as a man born blind continues so, he is scarcely sensible of his want. Much less, could we suppose a place where all were born without sight, would they be sensible of the want of it. (emphasis added)

theologically. It is also quite practically significant in his understanding of human behavior from the perspective of divine-human relationship. In their natural state persons are not only totally unable to do anything to remedy their sinful condition, but every attempt at self-reform only increases their original sinfulness (Works 1:118):

> Wherewithal then shall a sinful man atone for any the least of his sins? With his own works? No. Were they ever so many or holy, they are not his own, but God's. But indeed they are all unholy and sinful themselves, so that every one of them needs a fresh atonement. Only corrupt fruit grows on a corrupt tree. And his heart is altogether corrupt and abominable, being "come short of the glory of God," the glorious righteousness at first impressed on his soul, after the image of his great Creator. Therefore, having nothing, neither righteousness nor works, to plead, his "mouth is utterly stopped before God." (emphasis added)

As discussed earlier, the primary purpose of prevenient grace, in light of this view of the human condition, is not to help persons improve themselves, but to awaken them to the reality of their desperate situation. The absolute hopelessness of persons in their unregenerate state makes the revealing and exposing work of prevenient grace absolutely essential. For, so long as people live in the sin-born illusion of relative virtue, they have no hope of proceeding to the kind of repentance prerequisite to saving faith. In fact, failure to see the reality of original sin and their helplessness to overcome it leads persons inevitably along a path of idolatry, pride, and consuming self-will and self-love (Works 2:178-182).

Wesley closes his discourse on "Original Sin" with an encouraging word regarding the potential "healing" for souls so diseased by sin. The medium of this healing is faith of a very particular kind (Works 2:184):

> God heals all our atheism by the knowledge of himself, and of Jesus Christ whom he hath sent; by giving us faith, a divine evidence and conviction of God and of the things of God -- in particular of this important truth: Christ loved me, and gave himself for me. By repentance and lowliness of heart the deadly disease of pride is healed; that of self-will by resignation, a meek and thankful submission to the will of God. And for the love of the world in all its branches the love of God is the sovereign remedy. Now this is properly religion, "faith thus working by love," working the genuine, meek humility, entire deadness to the world, with a loving, thankful acquiescence in and conformity to the whole will and Word of God.

This statement highlights some crucial linkages in Wesley's concept of the process of salvation. Awareness of God and awareness of human sinfulness combine in God's gift of healing "knowledge" of himself. But this is a knowledge that goes beyond mere information; it strikes personally and deeply, as evidenced in Wesley's repetition of the personal pronouns. It also has real, experiential effects in reversing previous personality characteristics in a dramatic way. This knowledge has a divine origin, a "divine evidence and conviction of God."

Wesley goes on to stress the fact that it is the depth of human need which demands such a deep, pervasive "cure." He contrasts the cure of God-given faith with the more superficial external approach of reason and behavioral reformation, so common among the deists of his day (Works 2:170). He further explains (Works 2:184):

> Indeed if man were not thus fallen there would be no need of all this. There would be no occasion for this work in the heart, this "renewal in the spirit of our mind" . . . . For an outside religion without any godliness at all would suffice to all rational intents and purposes. It does accordingly suffice, in the judgment of those who deny this corruption of our nature. They make very little more of religion than the famous Mr. Hobbes did of reason. According to him, reason is only "a well-ordered train of words": accord-

> ing to them religion is only a well-ordered train of words and actions. And they speak consistently with themselves; for if the inside be not "full of wickedness," if this be clean already, what remains but to "cleanse the outside of the cup?" Outward reformation, if their supposition be just, is indeed the one thing needful.

Summary. Clearly, Wesley's understanding of salvation through saving faith is integrally linked to his understanding of human sin. The natural state of sinful human beings is such that they need something more than information and behavioral change, more than "well-ordered words and actions." At this point, Wesley offers no further clarification about the character of this "healing" faith other than to say that it is from God and it is deeply personal. Nor does he elaborate here on how one is able to experience it. The present focus for Wesley is to demonstrate the importance of a strong view of human sinfulness, if there is to be a correspondingly strong view of the remedy.

Faith and Repentance

Obviously, there are limits to how far this study can follow a detailed analysis of Wesley's understanding of faith. However, in order to comprehend the nature of prevenient grace, it is essential to consider one key question which strikes at the heart of a highly debated issue. It is crucial to clarify whether the saving faith that Wesley preached was primarily an act of the grace-empowered human will, a choice based on the gospel message; or, a special gift from God, comparable in its miraculous character to the gift of physical sight to the blind.

The importance of this question will become clearer in the consideration of its many implications later. Among the most important of

these is the way it informs the meaning of repentance.

Wesley's own struggle to find life-transforming faith is now legendary. For all of his conscious life he had believed in God and the truth of the gospel story, as well as all the doctrines of the Anglican church. Yet, this was not to him a satisfactory experience of saving faith; mainly because it was not accompanied by the fruits of faith he saw described in the Bible (Jackson, Works 1:98-103). When at last he did find saving faith, it was only after months of despair, repentance, counsel with friends, fasting and prayer. Unexpectedly faith came on the night of May 24th, 1738, while meeting with a small group of fellow seekers in Aldersgate Street, London. With this faith came the assurance that he did truly "trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation" (Jackson, Works 1:103).

Wesley's theology of saving faith and the "new birth" was powerfully shaped by his own experience, yet it seemed to cause him some trouble as he tried over the years to put it into theological terms. There is evidence of some shifts in perspective, such that in later life he was no longer obliged to declare his pre-Aldersgate "faith," no faith at all, but instead, the imperfect "faith of a servant" (Holland 1971:49). Throughout his life, however, Wesley never wavered from his conviction that something <u>supernatural</u> takes place in the experience of saving faith, and that this experience of faith is a gift from God, not a human choice. Apparently, Wesley inferred from his own experience that if human will and desire were the keys to faith, he certainly would have found it by that route, for few persons had sought faith so wholeheartedly.

Immediately following his "conversion" experience Wesley preached his famous sermon, "Salvation by Faith," in which he explained his understanding of truly saving faith, as opposed to various other popular conceptions. In very pointed language, he described the sort of faith that rests only on rational assurance of the truth of the Gospel as being the "faith of a devil" (Works 1:119):

> For the devil believes, not only that there is a wise and powerful God, gracious to reward and just to punish, but also that Jesus is the Son of God, the Christ, the Saviour of the world.

For Wesley the distinguishing aspect of the faith that saves is its impact on the "heart" of a person (Works 1:120):

> [I]t is not barely a speculative, rational thing, a cold, lifeless assent, a train of ideas in the head; but also a disposition of the heart. For thus saith the Scripture, "With the heart man believeth unto righteousness."

This concept of faith as something that went beyond rational assent was echoed repeatedly throughout Wesley's later preaching and writing. Because it was more than rational assent, it was beyond the ability of human will to control or order it. Persons cannot create the kind of faith that Wesley spoke of in order to attain justification.

This raises a difficult question; if persons cannot willfully fulfill the primary condition of salvation, what part do they have in being saved? To answer this it is very important to understand the specific sense in which Wesley saw faith as a condition for salvation. A. Skevington Wood explains this fine distinction as follows (1967:227 quoting Works 1:126):

> [The fact that faith is the condition of salvation] is so, however, not at all in the sense that it represents something to be done by man, which would make faith itself

> some kind of work. Wesley was particularly careful to guard his stress on faith as the condition of salvation from any semi-Pelagian misunderstanding. He knew very well that the true gospel invitation is not an easy or uneasy believism. Faith is not man's contribution to his own salvation: it is a gift from God. "Of yourselves cometh neither your faith nor your salvation," Wesley stressed: "'it is the gift of God'; the free, undeserved gift; the faith through which ye are saved, as well as the salvation which he of his own good pleasure, His mere favour annexes thereto. That ye believe, is one instance of grace; that believing ye are saved, another."
>
> All Wesley meant, then, by describing faith as the condition of salvation was simply that there is no justification without it. (emphasis added)

Albert Outler confirms Wood's claim about Wesley's caution regarding the definition of faith as a human act. Any "advocacy of salvation by assent had seemed dangerous to Wesley" (Works 2:153).[1]

If persons are not able to make a choice for faith by the act of the will, the question remains, what exactly is the human role in the process of salvation?

As discussed in part one, the primary responsibility of the person who has been made aware of his or her need for God's pardon and salvation is repentance. Prevenient grace not only opens one's eyes to the desperation of one's need, it also leads one into a further

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1. See also Wesley's statment in the sermon, "Salvation by Faith" (Works 1: 121):

> Christian faith is, then, not only an assent to the whole gospel of Christ, but also a full reliance on the blood of Christ: a trust in the merits of His life, death, and resurrection; a recumbency upon Him as our atonement and our life, as given for us, and living in us. It is a sure confidence which a man hath in God, that through the merits of Christ, his sins are forgiven, and he is reconciled to the favour of God, and in consequence hereof, a closing with Him, and cleaving to Him, as our "wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption'" or in a word, our salvation.

gift of "convicting" grace, which gives the necessary strength to repent wholeheartedly and to seek the various means of grace through which God ordinarily gives the gift of faith.[1] However, neither prevenient nor convicting grace gives persons the power simply to "have" faith, except in a very limited and non-saving sense, such as when the devils give "rational assent" to the claims of the Gospel.

The faith that saves is something that is given by God when the gracious effects of repentance have worked in a person's heart to the point that there is no longer any illusion of power to do anything toward his or her salvation (Works 11:48-49):

> It is the free gift of God . . . . No merit, no goodness in man, precedes the forgiving love of God. His pardoning mercy supposes nothing in us but a sense of mere sin and misery; and all who see, and feel, and own their wants, and their utter inability to remove them, God freely give faith, for the sake of him "in whom he is always well pleased."

Paradoxically, one must despair even of repentance itself, except as it is recognized as a work of God within the person. Repentance can easily be perverted into a plan of salvation by works, if one can only feel badly "enough" for one's sins. Since, for Wesley, one of the primary dynamics of sin is pride, or self-confidence apart from God, it is essential that the way to salvation be clearly antithetical to anything that could ever tie it to a person's own natural ability. He saw in his understanding of salvation by faith alone God's intentional antidote for any such prideful illusion (Works 1:198):

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1. One of the clearest concise treatments of Wesley's understanding of the means of grace can be found in Helmut Nausner's essay, "The Meaning of Wesley's General Rules: An Interpretation" (1989:52-58).

> One reason . . . of God's fixing this condition of justification [by faith, not works]. . . was to "hide pride from man." Pride had already destroyed the very angels of God . . . . It was likewise owing to this . . . that Adam fell from his own steadfastness and brought sin and death into the world. It is therefore an instance of wisdom worthy of God to appoint such a condition of reconciliation for him and all his posterity as might effectually humble, might abase them to the dust. And such is faith. It is peculiarly fitted to this end. For he that cometh to God by this faith must fix his eye singly on his own wickedness, on his guilt and helplessness, without having the least regard to any supposed good in himself, to any virtue or righteousness whatsoever. He must come as a mere sinner inwardly and outwardly, self-destroyed and self-condemned, bringing nothing to God but ungodliness only, pleading nothing of his own but sin and misery. Thus it is, and thus alone, when his "mouth is stopped," and he stands utterly "guilty before God," that he can "look unto Jesus" as the whole and sole "propitiation for his sins." Thus only can he be "found in him" and receive the "righteousness which is of God by faith." (emphasis added)

Wesley's relentless preaching of this kind of faith, even against tremendous opposition suggest that it was a non-negotiable part of his theology. As might be imagined, this preaching by Wesley found a very negative reception among his fellow clergy (Works 9:228-229), and forced him often to defend himself in on-going printed debate. However, among the common folk his message had its most powerful, and often upsetting, impact. Among them it received its own peculiar form of validation.

Bernard G. Holland's article entitled, "'A Species of Madness': The Effect of John Wesley's Early Preaching," examines the relationship between Wesley's preaching of faith as a gift and the nearly hysterical terror that often gripped his audiences as they felt the conviction of sin, but realized they were powerless in themselves to exercise saving faith (1973). Holland takes his title from a quotation of Wesley in "A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion" (Works 11: 196): "It is my endeavor to drive all I can, into what you may term [a] species of

'madness' . . . which I term 'repentance' or 'conviction'."

That people should sometimes have peculiar outward reactions[1] while under the influence of preaching seemed quite natural to Wesley, in spite of the embarrassment and reproach that came with it. In defense of this "madness," which Wesley's accusers saw as damaging evidence against the Methodists, he gladly claims and supports it on the "principles of reason or Scripture."

First, showing a remarkable awareness for psychosomatic dynamics Wesley explains that any extreme disturbance of the soul or mind is bound to effect the body as well (Works 11:197-198):

> For how easy it is to suppose that a strong, lively, and sudden apprehension of the heinousness of sin, the wrath of God, and the bitter pains of eternal death, should affect the body as well as the soul during the present laws of vital union; should interrupt or disturb the ordinary circulations, and put nature out of its course! Yea, we may question whether . . . it be possible for the mind to be affected in so violent a degree without some or other of those bodily symptoms following.

Second, Wesley finds in the numerous scriptural accounts of deliverance from demons another precedent for a physical anguish during transition. "Those spirits who excel in strength, as far as they have leave from God, will not fail to torment whom they cannot destroy; to tear those that are coming to Christ" (Works 11:198).

Wesley's cool perspective on these phenomena was not shared by his

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1. Wesley described these as follows (Works 11:197):

> While the word of God was preached, some persons have dropped down as dead; some have been as it were, in strong convulsions; some roared aloud, though not with articulate voice; and others spoke the anguish of their souls.

brother Charles or by fellow preacher, George Whitefield. While these agreed that the devil may have been involved, they saw the public outbursts as primarily his attempt to "discredit the Methodist movement" (Holland 1973:78).

Some scholars have tried to lay the blame on the hyper-emotional, charged rhetoric of Wesley and others. However, this hypothesis does not hold. Many reputable sources, working from eyewitness reports, have conclusively affirmed that Wesley had "not been an heated preacher, and that he did not deal frequently with the subject of hell in his sermons." Ironically, the more "heated" orators were George Whitefield and Charles Wesley. Yet outbursts and "convulsions" were far less frequent under their preaching than under the more "calmly logical" John Wesley. These factors lead Holland to conclude that the key ingredient accounting for the "madness" was not in the delivery, but in the content of the message. To him the "madness" can be traced to Wesley's understanding of the nature of saving faith as gift, not a choice (1973:79-80).

This connection may not seem obvious at first. Holland explains that although all the early Methodists agreed that faith came as a gift only from God, Wesley seems to have pressed the implications of this fact to their extremity. All early Methodist preachers agreed that a sense of fear in the face of personal sin and divine judgment was appropriate, but not all of them found people moved to "hysteria" under their preaching. Holland explains, "To become hysterical, people must feel not only threatened but also to some extent trapped or helpless in the face of the threat" (1973:80).

This sense of "trappedness" came from the belief that an awareness of sin and repentance alone do not ensure the coming of saving faith. The fact that this perspective is for the most part alien to contemporary evangelical theology and method bears further explanation.

> [T]he early Methodist doctrine of faith was [different] from our own current ideas. Modern teaching is that faith is exercised by the subject (helped, of course, by God's grace); the early Methodist doctrine was that faith is a gift from God, for which men or women "under conviction" have to wait, aware only of their helplessness. We say today that faith is a human act -- that people can voluntarily believe in God. The Wesleys said that all men can do is to plead with God to give them faith, which is His gift, given in His own time (Holland 1973:80).

What set John Wesley's message apart from Charles' and Whitefield's was his proclamation that even in that state of repentantly seeking and waiting for faith to come, a person remained lost and in danger of eternal judgment. Holland concludes, "It is thus scarcely surprising that people should have been driven into a state of hysteria" (1973:81). Charles Wesley and George Whitefield took a slightly less extreme position (Holland 1973:82): "Unlike John Wesley they assured people that when once they began to long for faith they were accepted by God (because of that longing) even before the gift of saving faith

was bestowed."[1]

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1. Holland refers to an earlier two-part article which he published in Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society in 1971. This is a comparative study in the "conversion" experiences of John and Charles Wesley, and how the differences between these two experiences and their interpretation correspond with two distinct tracks in Wesleyan theology.

Apparently, for Charles the pre-conversion struggle for faith was not nearly so intense as it was for John. But more significant was the fact that Charles equated his belief in the promises of God, which moved him to pray and seek a deeper personal awareness of Christ, with faith itself. What came when he "felt . . . a strange palpitation of heart" was only the assurance of his faith. For Charles this assurance of faith was the aspect which came as a special gift from God. Justifying faith was, on the other hand, "suppliant faith," that faith which on the basis of an "intellectual persuasion" of gospel truth gives a person "confidence to supplicate for living faith." Thus, while waiting in that seeking posture for "living faith" the "suppliant" could be assured on the testimony of his or her own seeking that justifying faith was already active (Holland 1971:50-53).

In part two of his article, Holland shows how, through a series of alterations, Charles Wesley's type of experience came to be the normative model for distinctly Methodist conversions. This transition seems appropriate to Holland who faults John Wesley's interpretation on hermeneutical and psychological grounds. In conclusion, Holland suggests that Charles, not John, should be credited with the uniquely "Wesleyan" view of conversion. In keeping with this, he recommends the commemoration of May 21st, 1738, and not May 24th. Whereas John provided the ingenious organizational structure, "it was Charles who, with a surer understanding of the human mind and spirit, taught Methodism 'our experience'" (71).

For Holland (1971:71), the crucial difference between John and Charles in regard to conversion came in their understandings of repentance, or "self-surrender," and saving faith:

> The difference between them, however, was this -- that for John self-surrender was not in itself justifying faith properly so called, while for Charles it was. For John, the self-abasement of the servant of God was directed towards the revelation of Christ which must be received before the sinner could have peace with God. For Charles, the self-emptying was in itself the act of faith to which peace and reconciliation are immediately given.

While this is apparently part of the difference between these two perspectives, it may not be complete. Nor may we be free simply to fine-tune this one aspect of John Wesley's theology. One factor that Holland seems to ignore is the fact that for John Wesley, faith is known by distinguishing fruits, more that the desire to seek after God. If it

There is evidence that John Wesley's perspective may have altered as the revival continued. Some of his later statements, as well as the diminishing accounts of the earlier "madness," suggest that Wesley

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is by faith that persons become Christians, the experience of faith should be accompanied by some of the fruits of a Christian life, more particularly the power and the fruits of the spirit (Works 11:107-108):

> [E]very man, in order to believe unto salvation, must receive the Holy Ghost. This is essentially necessary to every Christian, not in order to his working miracles, but in order to faith, peace, joy, and love -- the ordinary fruits of the Spirit.

It was the absence of these "ordinary fruits" (which he considered minimal evidence of salvation) in his own life that kept John Wesley seeking for faith, instead of assuming that his "intellectual persuasion" and extended period of repentant "self-emptying" was in itself saving faith. John Wesley apparently chose for himself to do without a theoretical sense of assurance which could not find empirical verification. Naturally, he held a similar standard for others, and feared any illusion of having found saving faith which might abort the God-given process for its true realization (see the two sermons on the "Witness of the Spirit," Works 1:267 & 285, and especially "The Nature of Enthusiasm" Works 2:50ff).

Immediately following Wesley's death, this issue of how to define saving faith came into heated debate among the Methodists. One preacher, Joseph Cooke, was expelled from the Conference in 1806 for having published an affirmation that faith was the equivalent of a volitional "believing," "an action to be performed" by persons (Holland 1971:67). A series of sermons and essays piled up on both sides of the debate, until Jabez Bunting was called upon in the 1812 Conference to address the issue definitively. He concluded that faith was "a complex act of the mind," and this became the standard for Methodism largely from that time forward (Holland 1971:69). A more detailed study of the gradual outworkings of this transition can be found in Robert Chiles' chapter, "From Free Grace to Free Will" (1965:144ff).

In spite of the fact that this perspective has come to majority acceptance, the designation of faith as a human act cannot be reconciled with John Wesley's perspective, nor can it be made the foundation for a truly "Wesleyan" understanding of prevenient grace. The focus of this study must remain on John Wesley, not on what developed as Methodist theology. For this reason, we have chosen to stay with his perspective in considering the contemporary implications of prevenient grace for mission practice. A similar focus of Charles Wesley and late Methodist theology might also be worthy of similar attention, but that is outside the limits of this study.

later put more confidence in a person's acceptability before God prior to saving faith. This acceptance was, however, contingent upon a full, ongoing response to the "light" available to particular persons -- a wholehearted "fear" of God and a diligent pursuit of "righteousness," which would inevitably be rewarded with the gift of faith. The intensity with which Wesley understood genuine "fear" of God the pursuit of "righteousness" has nothing in common with an ordinary quest for a virtuous lifestyle (Works 1:131). They were synonymous with a deep repentance, which, as the fruit of prevenient and convicting grace, would lead surely to saving faith, if progress was not aborted along the way.

Therefore, Wesley's confidence in the eventual salvation of persons who had not yet experienced faith lay in his trust that God would not allow a person earnestly seeking him to die before he or she had received the gift of saving faith. It was not a recognition of any salvific quality of the repentance itself. Some later writings of Wesley suggest a higher regard for "sincerity" (Fletcher 1:8), but regardless of any apparent transitions, it still does not seem that this softened view became as powerful for John as it had been for Charles.[1]

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1. Holland (1973:82) quotes Melville Horne, a man well acquainted with the preaching of both John and Charles Wesley, in an 1809 contrasting evaluation of the brothers:

> [F]ar from denouncing wrath on sincere Penitents . . . [Charles] comforted them, by insinuating that they were in a salvable state. He told them that they had the faith of God's Servants, though they were not yet sealed as his Sons, by the loving Spirit of Adoption. . . . To the best of my recollection, Mr. J. Wesley did not admit this distinction into his pulpit.

Although these distinctions between the Wesley brothers are of historical interest, the focus of this study must remain upon John Wesley. To preserve an authentic "Wesleyan" interpretation and application of the doctrine of prevenient grace, we must retain his understanding of saving faith as a gift, not a choice.

Summary. This discussion has focused on the linkage between Wesley's strong view of the "disease" of human sin, his equally strong view of the "cure" available through saving faith, and his concept of the manner in which disease and cure can be brought together. The nature and extent of sin precludes any human effort to obtain the cure, other than those to which persons are empowered by prevenient grace. Any work by human effort would only further the disease through feeding human pride and independence. In light of this undersatnding of sin, prevenient grace does not provide the freedom to choose faith, but only to become aware of its existence in God's universally saving will, to begin to seek it through the God-given means of active repentance, and to receive it when it comes.

Salvation: Justification and Sanctification

The centrality of repentance and faith in Wesley's theology is due to his vision of the salvation which they made available to previously lost sinners. Yet, for all its importance, Wesley's use of the word "salvation" was broad, and at times seems ambiguous. Even so there was in all his definitions a level of consistency; salvation always referred to dynamics of the divine-human relationship, and was always in reference to the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Although the relational,

Christocentric character of Wesley's concept of salvation significantly narrows the field of its compatibility with other missiological perspectives, still more precision is needed if the uniqueness of his interpretation of prevenient grace is to be fully appreciated.

From one perspective, Wesley saw salvation ultimately as the fully realized eternal glorification of a departed saint into the presence of God (Works 2:416-417). Yet, his was far from a primarily other-worldly orientation.[1] Although from the start Wesley was motivated by the goal of reaching heaven, this only led him to focus all the more intently on the "way" to get there outlined in Scripture (Works 1:105). What he found in them quickly and decisively fixed his attention on the earthly, "here and now" aspects of salvation seen in terms of real human transformation. It may not be too strong to say that for Wesley the means eclipsed the end, so passionate was his focus on the process as the

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1. Gordon Rupp's introductory analysis of the balance between heavenly and earthly concepts of salvation further illuminates this point, even though at this point his focus is more related to social implications of the gospel (Works 9:26-27):

> It is a gross caricature of early Methodism . . . to suggest that its really attractive power was the promise of compensation in heaven for the hardships of earth. The promise of heaven was inescapable and certainly included in the gospel Wesley preached, but if that had been the only, or even the chief, ingredient, why should the holders of local or national power have been afraid of Methodists as the agents of revolution? The truth is that Methodists were offered a double and interrelated citizenship of both earth and heaven, not one without the other. this was the "exaltation of the humble and the meek," and this was the breach in the class barrier through which the Methodists poured when they heard the "pure word of general grace."

only way to "see the Lord."[1] Wesley's conviction that the only way to heaven was through definitive transformation of the person here on earth made understanding and experiencing this transformation his great concern, both for himself and for the "world parish" he felt called to serve. It also influenced his definition of primary terms.

Wesley consistently emphasized the present, earthly aspects of salvation, almost to the point of intentionally down-playing the future and heavenly aspects. Referring to his text, "Ye are saved through faith," Ephesians 2:8, Wesley explains (Works 2:156):

> The salvation which is here spoken of is not what is frequently understood by the word, the going to heaven, eternal happiness. It is not the soul's going to paradise, termed by our Lord "Abraham's bosom." . . . The very words of the text itself put this beyond all question. "Ye <u>are</u> saved." It is not something at a distance: it is a present thing, a blessing which, through the free mercy of God, ye are now in possession of.

In order to affirm this <u>present</u> experience of salvation which ends in heaven, Wesley took two tracks. Sometimes he identified salvation with the <u>whole process</u> itself, speaking very broadly. For example, he continues the previous train of thought by saying "salvation . . . might

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1. In Wesley's sermon. "The General Spread of the Gospel," he gives this account of the early Methodists' search for the way of salvation (Works 2:490-491):

> Between fifty and sixty years ago God raised up a few young men in the University of Oxford, to testify those grand truths which were then little attended to:
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> That without holiness no man shall see the Lord;
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> That this holiness is the work of God, who worketh in us both to will and to do;
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> That this holiness is the mind that was in Christ, enabling us to walk as Christ walked;
>
> That no man can be thus sanctified till he is justified; and,
>
> That we are justified by faith alone.

be extended to the entire work of God, from the first dawning of grace in the soul till it is consummated in glory" (Works 2:156). The fact that all human experience can be understood in terms of its positive or negative relation to this salvation process adds a significant dimension of meaning to daily existence, as well as highlighting the "here and now" character of salvation. Without being in heaven, persons can still be participating in salvation so defined. He elaborates on this interpretation as follows (Works 2:156-157):

> If we take this in its utmost extent [salvation] will include all that is wrought in the souls by what is frequently termed "natural conscience," but more properly, "preventing grace," all the "drawings" of "the father," the desires after God, which, if we yield to them, increase more and more; all that "light" wherewith the Son of God "enlighteneth everyone that cometh in to the world," showing every man "to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with his God"; all the convictions which his Spirit from time to time works in every child of man. Although it is true the generality of men stifle them as soon as possible, and after a while forget, or at least deny, that ever they had them at all.

Most often, however, Wesley emphasizes the "present-tense" quality of salvation by focusing not on the whole process, but the specific nature of faith as real, life-transforming experience with definite empirical fruits and specific implications for daily existence.[1] Because faith can be so tangibly experienced here and now, Wesley can speak of a salvation as a "present thing." While Wesley affirms the saving character of the whole order of salvation, and the redemptive nature of each stage, the experience of faith stands out as the point where salvation

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1. For more details on the idea of actual transformation in the life of the believer, see the sermons, "The New Birth" (Works 2: 186) and "The Marks of the New Birth" (Works 1:415).

begins in earnest. With the gift of faith comes a fundamental change in relationship between the person and God; and with this change of relationship, a new, deeper access to transforming, empowering grace which can eventually lead to salvation's ultimate fulfillment.

This perspective on faith as the decisive transition point accounts for the majority of Wesley's references to salvation. As the means to salvation, the experience of faith is the origin of two essential and distinct changes that for Wesley define salvation's most fundamental biblical meaning. "[A]t present [we are] concerned only with that salvation which the Apostle is directly speaking of. And that consists of two general parts, justification and sanctification" (Works 2:157). Elsewhere he repeats this two-part characterization as the basic definition of "proper Christian salvation . . . consisting of those two grand branches, justification and sanctification" (Works 3:204).

This concept of salvation in terms of two "grand branches" can once again be traced directly to Wesley's two-part understanding of sin and its impact on human beings. All persons stand before God both guilty of sins they have committed in the past (Works 1:122), and crippled by the power of sin which traps them in a cycle of sinful behavior (Works 1:123).

Aside from divine intervention, Wesley saw the human situation as hopeless. Prior to justification Wesley believed it was impossible for a

person to do anything worthy of God's approval.[1] Even after justification, further sins were inevitable. For Wesley, a salvation worthy of its name must address both past sins and the power of sin itself. Otherwise, persons are left as spiritual "hybrids," as it were, locked in a cycle of sin and repentance in which even the miracle of justification becomes meaningless for daily experience.

In response to this desperate situation, Wesley believed God gives all persons a measure of prevenient grace, which, if it is not suppressed (Works 2:157), can lead them through various means to an awareness of their true condition. Convicting or "convincing" grace (Works 3:204) enables them to act on this awareness in repentance, and to seek faith through the "means of grace" (Works 1:376), until God gives it as a gift. Wesley believed that "through this faith they are [then] saved from the power of sin as well as the guilt of it" (Works 1:123). At this point the penitent sinner is not only "justified" completely, but a subsequent process of "sanctification" begins.

These statements raised questions as much in Wesley's time as today. He wrote extensively trying to define, clarify, and defend his understanding of these two key terms. The following quotations from his definitive sermon "The Scripture Way of Salvation" are concisely representative, and must suffice for a more detailed treatment (Works 2:157-158):

> Justification is another word for pardon. It is the forgiveness of all our sins, and (what is necessarily implied therein) our acceptance with God. The price whereby this

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1. "We . . . steadily assert that the will of man is by nature free only to evil" (Jackson, Works 10:392)

> hath been procured for us (commonly termed the "meritorious cause" of our justification) is the blood and righteousness of Christ, or (to express it a little more clearly) all that Christ hath done and suffered for us till "he poured out his soul for the transgressors." The immediate effects of justification are, the peace of God, a "peace that passeth all understanding," and a "rejoicing in hope of the glory of God," "with joy unspeakable and full of glory."
>
> And at the same time that we are justified, yea, in that very moment, sanctification begins. In that instant we are "born again," "born from above," "born of the Spirit." There is a real as well as a relative change. We are inwardly renewed by the power of God. We feel the "love of God shed abroad in our heart by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us," producing love to all mankind, and more especially to the children of God; expelling the love of the world, the love of pleasure, of ease, of honour, of money, together with pride, anger, self-will, and every other evil temper -- in a word, changing the "earthly, sensual, devilish" mind into "the mind which was in Christ Jesus."

The gift of faith therefore brings first a change of relationship, and second the beginning of a change in character. Although Wesley saw the three -- faith, justification, and initial sanctification -- combined experientially in the moment of "new birth," it was crucial that they remain clearly distinct theologically. Otherwise, confusion quickly sets in. This distinction seems to have been one of the stickiest issues in the various theologies interacting in the Wesleyan revival. Wesley's own precarious balance between the two remained the doctrinal standard of Methodism barely twenty years after his death (Holland 1973:65ff).

In his efforts to maintain these distinctions one can sense Wesley's concern to find harmony between experience and the formulations of Scripture. There is also evidence of his strong empirically based epistemology. For Wesley, subjective experiences were of great value, not in themselves, but because they were usually reliable human responses to a genuine "antecedent reality" (L. Wood 1975:55-56).

While recognizing the potential for self-deception and spiritual blindness (Works 2:44), Wesley's understanding of providence protected him against skepticism. His confidence in the trustworthy interaction of human sensibilities -- including faith-given spiritual sensibilities (Works 4:30) -- sprung from refusal to believe that "God is 'the Father of lies' who has deceived man into believing as true something that is false" (L. Wood 1975:55).

Similarly, Wesley was repelled by the idea that one could confidently believe something true before its reality was experienced in a convincing way.[1] In maintaining the distinction between the different

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1. This strong belief appears implicitly in much of Wesley's work, but is explicit in at least two places. First, in his sermon on the "Catholic Spirit," Wesley states that persons cannot genuinely believe things at will, nor can they simply change their minds Works 2:89):

> I do not mean, "Be of my opinion." You need not. . . . Neither do I mean, "I will be of your opinion." I cannot. It does not depend on my choice. I can no more think than I can see or hear as I will. (emphasis added)

The foundation for Wesley's ideas concerning the limitation of human will in regard to belief is found in his sermon, "On the Discoveries of Faith." For Wesley, it is impossible to genuinely believe something that has not decisively imposed itself on the mind through the senses (Works 4:29):

> For many ages it has been allowed by sensible men, Nihil est in intellectu quod non fruit prius in sensu: that is, "There is nothing in the understanding which is not first perceived by some of the senses." All knowledge which we naturally have is originally derived from our senses. And therefore those who want any sense cannot have the least knowledge or idea of the objects of that sense -- as they that never had sight have not the least knowledge or conception of light or colours.

Because spiritual things are not accessible to the mind through the ordinary senses, Wesley saw in the gift of faith the provision for

aspects in the order of salvation, and in stressing the sequence of their flow, Wesley was ensuring the "antecedent" quality of faith as a gift from God, from "outside" the person.

Wesley emphasized the fact that faith was the condition of justification, and was thus logically "previous," even though it might be experientially simultaneous. Likewise the "effects" of justification -- the assuring "peace," "hope," and "joy" -- necessarily "followed" justification. In stressing what might seem an obvious point Wesley was addressing a significant doctrinal controversy involving those who wanted to equate faith with assurance, thereby making assurance the condition of justification. To Wesley this was an inadmissible logical absurdity, even if the distinctions were hard to maintain experientially. Genuine assurance came from the "divine evidence and conviction" that the justification had in fact "already" taken place (Works 2:161-162). In other words, one's feelings of assurance were produced by the reality of having actually been justified; justification was not produced by feelings of assurance. This distinction formed a hedge against those who would try to generate "faith" from "within" by ardent, intentional "believing."

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this lack (Works 4:30). He takes this from his reading of the text, Hebrews 11:1, which says, "Now faith is the evidence of things not seen [or sensed in any other normal ways]." Therefore, although faith is separate from the ordinary senses and given as a special gift, it functions in regard to the mind in a way analogous to the other senses. Spiritual realities can be communicated to the mind, and thereby believed, only through faith. Faith, therefore precedes and is the basis for genuine belief; not vice versa: "Therefore confidence, trust, reliance, adherence, or whatever else it might be called, is not the first, as some have supposed, but the second branch or act of faith" (Works 2:162).

The second distinction that Wesley maintained tenaciously was between justification and sanctification. In his earlier days he had viewed sanctification as the prerequisite for acceptance from God. However, his own struggle and experience of faith cemented what he had heard the Moravians saying, viz., that justification came by faith alone. After 1737 Wesley grew in his conviction that just as faith preceded justification, even more decisively does justification precede sanctification. In fact, it is only on the basis of the grace received in justification that sanctification could ever begin to be realized.[1]

Just as important as the sequencing of these events in the order of salvation was the correct understanding of what each experience was and was not. In fact, it was only by recognizing the distinct character of each that their proper sequential relationship could be understood. In stressing the fact that justification was the beginning of sanctification Wesley had no intention of merging the two dynamics. His concept of justification was clearly circumscribed in its "relative" character. The "real" change in the person's character was dependent on the separate, though dependent process of sanctification. A. Skevington Wood 1967:228-229) describes these differences:

> In dealing with the actual nature of justification, Wesley correctly explained that in Scripture this does <u>not</u> mean

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1. The following is Wesley's own description of his theological development over time concerning these issues (Jackson, Works 8:300):

> In 1729, two young men, reading the Bible, saw they could not be saved without holiness, followed after it, and incited others so to do. In 1737 they saw holiness comes by faith. They saw likewise, that men are justified before they are sanctified; but still holiness was their point.

> being made righteous, but simply being declared righteous, and treated as such. Thus the line between justification and sanctification is sharply drawn and the two are not confused. Nor does justification involve a legal fiction, still less any self-deception on God's part. [quoting Wesley] "The plain scriptural notion of justification is pardon, the forgiveness of sins. It is the act of God the Father, whereby, for the sake of the propitiation made by the blood of His Son, He 'showeth forth His righteousness' (or mercy) 'by the remission of sins that are past'." (emphasis added).

By stressing this distinction, Wesley removes any option of stopping at the point of justification. Justification is decisive and crucial, but very limited in regard to the whole process and goal of salvation. Although justification is prerequisite to going on in the process of sanctification, it is not the transformation necessary to fit a person for heaven. Recall Wesley's conviction "that without holiness [not pardon] no man shall see the Lord" (Works 2:490). Wesley clearly stressed that justification only addresses the guilt of "sins that are past." Deliverance from the power of sin which makes future sins inevitable must come from a source other than God's justifying pardon.

This is the role of sanctification. It begins with the gift of justifying faith, but is only complete when the love for God that was planted at justification is perfectly fulfilled, overpowering the natural bent toward intentional disobedience of God's will. This transformation is rooted in the power of the Holy Spirit to give to justified sinners the actual "mind of Christ," which is always interpreted by Wesley in terms of love.

This Christlike love, given by the Holy Spirit, is for Wesley the ultimate distinguishing mark of the Christian (Works 1:161ff). The fact that it is unattainable except by supernatural intervention, and only

very poorly counterfeited by human effort, builds into the Christian experience a sort of "quality control" mechanism; a means by which Christians can both know themselves and identify each other.[1] The fact that this love comes only from one source, and only as a gift through faith (Works 9:124-125) is the unique basis for all Christian unity.

Summary. In lieu of further comment, the following statements from Wesley will serve to summarize his essential theology and his use key theological terms (Works 9:226-228):

> Let us labour to convince all mankind that to be a real Christian is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and to serve him with all our strength; to love our neighbor as ourselves, and therefore do unto every man as we would he should do unto us . . . .
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> Our main doctrines, which include all the rest, are three, that of repentance, of faith, and of holiness. The first of these we account, as it were, the porch of religion; the next the door; the third is religion itself.
>
> That repentance, or conviction of sin, which is always previous to faith (either in a higher or lower degree, as it pleases God) we describe in words to this effect:
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> When men feel in themselves the heavy burden of sin . . . they cannot but accuse themselves, and open their grief unto Almighty God, and call unto him for mercy. . . .
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> . . . . . .
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> Concerning the gate of religion . . . the true, Christian, saving faith, we believe it implies abundantly more than an assent to the truth of the Bible . . . .
>
> The right and true Christian faith is . . . a sure trust and confidence, which a man hath in God, that by the merits of Christ his sins are forgiven, and he is reconciled to the favour of God.

Conclusion

This overview of some of Wesley's larger theology has been limit-

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1. The implications of this dynamic is beautifully expressed in Wesley's sermon on the "Catholic Spirit" (Works 2:79).

ed by the primarily implicational focus of this last section and the purpose of this thesis. Most obviously, it has only touched on the front "edge" of Wesley's very significant doctrine of full salvation or sanctification (see Lindström 1980). This is due to the specific focus on the doctrine of prevenient grace which seems more concerned with the beginning of Christian experience than with the end. The treatment of the other doctrines of sin, repentance, faith, and justification have been sketchy, but with a sincere effort to choose references that do justice to what would ideally be a more detailed analysis.

Any such analysis is open to debate. This is all the more true in Wesleyan studies, where the bulk of material is drawn from his sermons. Each of these is but a very small window into Wesley's mind, a small representation of a more comprehensive theology which was never systematically articulated. The sermons were composed over a long life-time; and, like much of the New Testament, most were addressed to specific contexts and needs, designed to yield certain results.

There are some apparent contradictions, in spite of Wesley's best efforts at consistency. In recognizing these it is helpful to remind ourselves again of the provisional nature of both scriptural and theological language, models, and metaphors. "It is important to see that Wesley is not rigid and hard in the use of his theological terms" (Aikens 1979:68).

Probably nowhere is this more true than in Wesley's attempt to articulate the meaning of faith in relation to the complex mix of human emotions and impressions that precede, accompany, and follow its experience. Wesley seems to have been better at describing how real faith

"feels" than what it actually is. But his epistemology demanded the existence of a reality "antecedent" to these feelings, and this strongly influenced his attempts at defining faith.

Wesley's many descriptions of faith were not altogether satisfactory even in his own day, as seen in the frustrated remarks of the soon to be de-frocked Joseph Cooke. He observed that Wesley gave many definitions of "what justifying faith is not," but lamented, "after the closest examination I have not been able to discover, in all his writings within forty years of that time [1747], one single definition of what faith is" (Holland 1971:70).

Whether or not Joseph Cooke's particular indictment is altogether fair, the fact remains that Wesley's definition of faith has not been altogether satisfactory to modern readers either. It has certainly invited a variety of interpretations.

In the presence of these interpreations, the one primary goal of this overview has been to highlight the key distinction between faith as a gift and faith as a choice. The reason for this effort is that on this particular polarity hangs a significant collection of missiological implications. Does the missionary task involve the presentation of Christian faith as an option to be chosen, or a gift to be received? Who is the primary actor in the transition from unbelief to faith? What kind of faith most unifies the global church -- that which is chosen, or that which is given?

Aside from later interpretations and reinterpretations of standard Methodist doctrine, it seems clear that on this one point Wesley speaks plainly for himself. Whether or not he builds an air-tight theological

and psychological case for it, and whether or not contemporary Wesleyans accept it, Wesley saw faith as a gift. It is on the basis of this affirmation that this study proceeds.

Like his doctrine of faith, Wesley's understanding of the primary human need, and the salvation prepared by God to meet it, will also be significant as we try in the next chapter to construct a Wesleyan understanding of persons in context and their interaction with the Gospel.

CHAPTER 10

PREVENIENT GRACE AND CONTEXT

Introduction: Bringing Wesley's Theology into Missiological Dialogue

Placing the preceding theological overview at the beginning of part three is justifiable in light of the often ambiguous use of theological terms in missiological dialogue. In moving into contemporary missiological application of Wesley's theology one of the first instincts is to look for common ground within the categories of the existing missiological perspectives. At first glance this common ground seems abundant, especially in light of widespread optimism about God's "previous" work in all human contexts.[1] Superficially understood, the doctrine of prevenient grace seems an apt theological basis for a wide variety of contextual interpretations. Missiologists also use most of Wesley's key

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1. One representative statement to this effect comes from Paul Beauchamp (1983:2):

> [We should] acknowledge the local traditions that stood prior to the introduction of Christianity in each part of the world, as bearing some part of positive relationship to the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Elsewhere he states, "No one could deny that we must have a positive appreciation of pre-Christian traditions" (1983:2).

From a Protestant perspective, Max Stackhouse, affirms a similar optimism about God's previous work by requesting "recognition that many social and cultural systems can see (sic) the means by which God cares for people" (1988:7).

terms, such as "faith," "sin," and "salvation." However, it takes only a cursory examination to see that these terms can be used with widely divergent meanings; and here is the potential for serious misunderstanding. In spite of superficial similarity, seldom are the components within differing theological structures truly interchangeable.

Faith Definitions: A Study in Conceptual Ambiguity

To illustrate this point, it may be helpful to examine the various shapes of meaning for the component labeled "faith" in a variety of current missiological structures. In contrast to Wesley's extremely specific understanding and use of this term, contemporary usage includes a wide variety of meanings. One of the most common is to equate the "faith" with the larger generic category, "religion." For example, the World Council of Churches-sponsored meeting between representatives of all the major world religions in 1970 was called "Dialogue Between Men of Living Faiths"[1] (Hesselgrave 1979:8). Christianity as a world religion was one of the "faiths" represented.

Another common usage is to equate "faith" with Christianity, or more specifically, the Christian message or Gospel. In his recent book, Toward a Theology of Inculturation, Aylward Shorter says, "A short definition of inculturation is an on-going dialogue between faith and culture or cultures. More fully, it is the creative and dynamic rela-

1. The emphasis on the word "faith" throughout this discussion has been added for the sake of present readers, and is not a part of the original quotations.

tionship between the Christian message and a culture or cultures" (1988:11). Max Stackhouse uses a similar definition in his discussion of contextualization: "It is presumed throughout that the gospel, the faith, is pertinent to, and can be contextualized in every context it addresses . . . " (1988:4). Later he says, "The church over the ages . . . has contextualized the faith" (5).

Often, the particular meaning of the term "faith" is harder to identify. Leonardo Boff explains, "Liberation theology in Asia, Africa and Latin America sets out to examine the faith from the wretched situation in which the Third World finds itself" (1988:9). Describing the methods of Vincent Donovan (1978), Robert Schreiter speaks of "planting the seed of faith and allowing it to interact with the native soil" (1985:11).

Daniel von Allmen's landmark essay, "The Birth of Theology" (1975) talks about the "Semitic character of the Christian faith" (38); "the primitive faith" vs. a "Hellenized theology"; the need of the early church for persons "capable of translating the received faith for people of a different mentality" (41); and, the instinct for people to "sing their faith" (42). One of his prime conclusions is that faith comes first, then theology (44). He makes many strong points, but without clarifying his understanding of the recurring term "faith" except as something distinct from and previous to "theology."

Following von Allmen very closely, Charles Taber asks, "Is There More Than One Way to Do Theology" (1978)? In this essay he affirms that "Faith -- not theology -- comes first" (5) Here faith seems to be equated with a "personal encounter with God" (5), but the nature of this

encounter is ambiguous enough to leave C. Rene Padilla asking, "What does he really mean by 'faith' when he states that 'theology follows faith, it does not precede it'" (1978:31).

In other theological contexts "faith" seems to have a decidedly credal connotation, once again quite wide of Wesley's understanding. No doubt this more cognitive concept of faith was part of what Taber and von Allmen were arguing against -- and they are not alone (Kraft 1979) -- in separating faith from theology. Yet, it is interesting that in the discussion of Taber's article, many of the wide cross-section of commentators consistently use rational categories to talk about faith (Barney 1978:11; Bediako 1978:13; Henry 1978:23). They are joined by Stackhouse, who says, "there is something about the faith itself which is true and just and of universal importance, and that we can, in some measure, know what that is and bring it into new contexts" (emphasis added) (1988:5). Throughout his essay, Stackhouse repeatedly equates the faith and the gospel with the categories of "truth and justice." "Christianity is based on universally valid claims about the truth and justice of God" (5).

Closely related to this cognitive/credal perspective are those who seem to regard "faith" as a human response or a choice to be made. G. Linwood Barney affirms plainly that "faith is a response" (1978:11). James A. Bergquist speaks of the Gospel as a "call to faith" (1978:14-15).

As hard as it is to define faith itself, the question of "faith's" meaning becomes even more complex when it is approached in terms of its particular focus. Where "faith" is not equated with "religion" in

general, or the Christian religion in particular, it is usually described in terms of its particular object, that is, "faith" in something or someone. Often it is the specific character of its object which defines whether it is "faith" or some other form of knowing. In categories reminiscent of the familiar Kantian dualism, Shorter explains, "The religious view of the world includes the divine order, the ultimate reality which is the object of faith and worship, and which is not empirically knowable" (1988:38). One wonders if it is this "unknowableness" itself which makes something an object of "faith."

This seems to parallel Paul Tillich's understanding of "religion" as simply, "ultimate concern" (1959:7), or "being ultimately concerned about that which is and should be our ultimate concern" (1959:40). Elsewhere he says, "the state of being ultimately concerned is itself religion" (1959:8); and "faith" is "the state of being grasped by ultimate concern." In these terms it is easy to understand his definition of "God" as simply "the name for the content of that concern" (1959:40).

Having such a broad definition of faith raises the question of what Shorter could mean when he speaks of inculturation as the "insertion of faith into a culture" (1988:6). First, if "faith" is understood as relating simply to "ultimate reality," all known cultures already treat that issue in their own way: What is yet to be "inserted?" If "faith" is taken to mean "Christian faith," questions still remain. Does evangelization mean offering an alternative, "Christian" equivalent of the existing "empirically unknowable" "object of faith and worship?"

For Wesley, the distinction and authority of Christian faith was not the fact that Christ -- and not some other being -- was its

"unknowable" "ultimate object," but that through faith Christ could become personally known in a life-transforming way. The uniqueness of the living, personally available Christ as the "object of concern" defined a unique relational and experiential concept of faith.

This raises the second question of how exactly "cultures" experience "faith." "Faith" is defined not only by its object, but also by its subject. What entities can legitimately be said to have or experience "faith?" If cultures can experience "faith," does this imply that the "faith" of a culture the same as the "faith" of a person?

For Tillich, "faith" and culture are inextricably interwoven: "religion is the substance of culture, culture is the form of religion" (1959:42). Yet he also affirms that "religion is the aspect of depth in the totality of the human spirit" (1959:7). Tillich is not the only one to affirm the interrelatedness of personal and collective religious experience, but the nature of this relationship is very hard to define.

Without, trying to resolve Tillich's and Shorter's definitions, it is clear enough that they are quite alien to Wesley's very specific concept of faith, which was focused tightly, not on "ultimate concern," but on "Christ, and God through Christ, [which] are the proper object of it" (Works 1:120).

The particularity of Wesley's faith makes it difficult to understand just how it can be experienced by a collective entity such as "culture" in all its various definitions. The primary verbs in his descriptions can be applied to only the most abstract and personified concepts of culture or society, and this raises questions. In what sense, for example, does a real, particular human culture (or any other

contextual designation) experience a "divine evidence or conviction of things not seen?" More particularly, how can any collective entity -- culture, race, economic class -- experience something that was to Wesley so uniquely personal and individual: "a sure trust and confidence that Christ died for my sins, that he loved me, and gave himself for me" (Works 2:195)? These personal pronouns, always italicized in Wesley's writing, are the hallmarks of his view of saving faith.

Prospects of a Wesleyan Alternative

It is not necessary to offer here a Wesleyan critique of each concept of faith mentioned above. This consideration of only a few of the dominant interpretations is enough to demonstrate first, the importance of defining key terms, and second, the uniqueness of Wesley's perspective against much of the current dialogue. The fact that his understanding of saving faith is incompatible with many of the existing missiological models suggests the same negative prospect for his concept of the prevenient grace designed to lead persons to this faith. This may limit the potential contribution of the doctrine of prevenient grace within other theological models and paradigms. However, within its own fundamental categories it has many significant implications for ministry.

For some missiologists a contribution such as Wesley's will be interpreted as a step backward, due to its Christological particularity and its primary emphasis upon a personal vs. cultural experience of faith. Lucien Richard writes, "The greatest difficulty we face is the nature of the central revelatory symbol in Christianity, Jesus the

Christ, as unique and absolute . . . . Christian thinkers have a clear responsibility to find ways to de-particularize the Christ" (1988:66).

Clearly, Wesley would be pushing hard in the opposite direction. However, the chauvinism, exclusivism, and divisiveness that many missiologists seem to fear from the particularity of Christ, Wesley also abhorred. And, contrary to appearances, the implications of his theology, both in his own day and in the present, hold potential for great spiritual unity.

The following section proposes to develop a Wesleyan understanding of the Gospel relating to persons as persons in context, built on the Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace. As discussed earlier, Wesley's concept of prevenient grace seems uniquely qualified not only to deal with the multiplicity of contextual matrices in which contemporary human beings participate, but also to offer energizing clarity to a missiological community in which some at least are starting to doubt the effectiveness of its long-standing alliance with the "contextual sciences" (Krass 1979; Stackhouse 1988). The doctrine of prevenient grace provides a theological base for the full functioning of all aids to understanding the human experience, both personal and collective, within the overall goals and purposes of the Kingdom of God.

Contextual Implications of Prevenient Grace

The Responsive Character of Human Experience

Helmut Nausner describes Wesley's concept of the church as "a fellowship of responders" (1998:44). Similarly, missions anthropolo-

gist, Alan R. Tippet, affirms that "every human action a re-action" (1976:91). While affirming these statements, it is important to ask what, specifically, persons are responding to. What exactly has addressed humanity and transformed human existence into a response?

At the most fundamental level, all human existence is responsive due to the fact of Creation. Wesley makes this clear at the start of his sermon, "Salvation by Faith":

> It is free grace that "formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into him a living soul," and stamped on that soul the image of God, and "put all things under his feet." The same free grace continues in us, at this day, life, and breath, and all things. For there is nothing we are, or have, or do which can deserve the least at God's hand. "All our works thou, O God, hast wrought in us" (Works 1:117-118).

As Wesley continues to develop his point, the thrust is unavoidable. All human existence is derived, contingent existence; there is nothing a person can do which is not essentially a response to what God has already done in creation.

There is, however, another sense in which human behavior is fundamentally responsive which does not derive primarily from the doctrine of Creation. Conceptually, its source is found in the doctrine of the Atonement. The degree of distinction between the two depends on one's doctrine of the Fall.

For Wesley, the Fall decisively reversed what began in Creation. Adam's sin created a unique situation of spiritual non-existence comparable to the non-existence of humanity prior to creation. "In Adam, all died" (Works 2:173, 189-190). Yet, the "death" and the loss of being produced by sin was of a particular kind. It could not be remedied by

a simple recreation (Works 2:488-489). What remained of humanity was no longer neutral, cooperative "dust," but prideful, God-resisting "flesh." It was, therefore, only by the second grace of redemption through the "second Adam" that self-destroyed humanity can be given life a second time (Works 2:410-411).

Wesley believed that, unlike the first act of creation, the new creation act of God cannot accomplish its goal without the willing cooperation of each person (Works 2:488-489). This is the function of prevenient grace: to prepare persons for the beginning of their re-creation in Christ, by opening them to a willing acceptance of the process. Wesley believed that only after this new beginning can the real re-creative process (sanctification) begin. The transition experience of saving faith is the start of a divinely-empowered "new creation" leading to the full redemption of humanity, now to a status even greater that its pre-Fall original (Works 2:411, 424).[1]

Therefore, in light of Christ's atonement, human experience is a response, no longer just to Creation, but to the limitless possibilites of the kingdom of God brought into the "here and now" by the resurrection. Christ, not Adam, is the new model of true humanity. Therefore, although all human existence is fundamentally responsive in reference to Creation, the particular responses of persons to prevenient grace, with its specifically redemptive goal, are unique and crucial.

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1. Wesley boldly asserted that the possibilities for human restoration through Christ are infinitely greater now after Adam's than they could have been before. His sermon, "God's Love to Fallen Man" (Works 2:423) is a remarkable doxology, revealing the height of Wesley's concept of both the Atonement and the glorious experiential reality of full salvation, to say nothing of the glories of heaven.

To summarize, the ultimate goal of the Atonement is the full salvation of humanity. However, the immediate goal of prevenient grace is to bring persons to the transition point of saving faith, where the limitless possibilities of salvation can start to be fulfilled. In Christ, from the "foundation of the world," God has provided the ground for human redemption. In the dynamic functioning of prevenient grace God has created the perpetual option for persons to act responsively to this redemption, even when its explicit character is obscured. What Christ's atoning work makes objectively possible, prevenient grace makes subjectively accessible to all persons. However, because it is only accessible and not inevitable, the blessings of the Atonement are forever contingent on human response.

Polarizing Impact of the Atonement and Prevenient Grace

The primary implication of the combined impact of Christ's atonement and the reality of prevenient grace is that they automatically polarize all human experience around the option of salvation.

In keeping, first, with Wesley's concept of original sin, and second, with the possibilities of grace to lead to a "new creation" more glorious than the first, human experience can be characterized by one's orientation toward either of these poles. Very few, if any, human thoughts, words, or deeds can be seen as neutral in the presence of the possibilities inherent in the atonement and prevenient grace. Christ has made full salvation a live option for all, and prevenient grace calls persons, in an infinite variety of ways, to self-awareness and

subsequent repentance preparatory to receiving the gift of faith. Even the limited freedom of choice which prevenient grace provides adds a dimension of eternal significance to every decision.

In other words, Christ's atonement, by the sovereign will of God, and unrequested by human beings, creates an unavoidable relationship between God and all persons. Some kind of orientation toward God is ineveitable. Prevenient grace offers to all the option to decide its fundamental character.

If this polarization of all human activity seems extreme, it is important to recall the all-pervasive, penetrating character of prevenient grace as Wesley understood it. It is impossible to conceive of an area of human experience "protected" from its influence. Choices made for or against the influence of grace are not at all restricted to the specifically "religious" domains of life. All possibilities remain open to the persistent creativity of the Holy Spirit to find the first positive response, no matter how mundane, which can lead to ever-increasing openness. However, all of these overtures remain equally vulnerable to human rejection, as well. Wesley lamented the fact that in spite of "all the convictions which [God's] Spirit from time to time works in every child of man . . . the generality of men stifle them as soon as possible, and after a while forget, or at least deny, that they ever had them at all" (Works 2:157).

What does this polarization imply for a concept of persons in context?

Contextual Implications of Polarized Responsiveness

The polarizing effect of grace-born human responsiveness has four major implications for a Wesleyan concept of human contextuality.

First the redeeming potential of the atonement and prevenient grace relativizes all other models of contextuality. Understood from a Wesleyan perspective the power of this potential defines the primary context for all human beings in terms of their response to grace. All persons, in any setting, at any given moment, are either cooperating with grace, or overriding its influence. Therefore, within all human contexts there exists an unseen "sub-context" of individual and collective grace-reponse. The one thing common to all human groups is the fact of grace and the existence of some configuration of a response. Ministry in a Wesleyan mode anywhere begins with this presupposition.

Second, although all contextual patterns are secondary to the potentials of salvation, the combination of Wesley's perspective on grace and human freedom creates a unique understanding and respect for the many differing patterns of human contexts. If the potentials of grace interact with truly free human beings, there can be at any moment infinite combinations of grace with varying degrees of resistance and receptivity. Although prevenient grace is constant, its fruits in personal experience are diverse and dynamic in character. Persons live together with others who, like themselves, are constantly creating their own grace responses. Relationships combine these indiviudal responses to grace into configurations that are equally, if not more, diverse. Therefore, although the existence of some collective response to grace

is axiomatic, its particular pattern in any context is unique, and should be recognized as such.

If ministry is to align with prevenient grace, this places strong emphasis on the interpretation of its existing collective results. However, this cannot be the sole focus of attention, because of the nature of saving faith. Understood in the Wesleyan sense, it remains a matter of individual person-to-person contact with Christ. This suggests a third implication to address the dynamics of individuals responding to grace in a context of collective responses to grace. Wesley's understanding of grace, freedom, and personal responsiveness lays a firm foundation for taking seriously and working with the complexity of group dynamics.

The reality of collective responses to grace creates yet another level of individual responsiveness which effective ministry must address. Persons interact on an individual basis to the overtures of the Holy Spirit, but they also live amid and contribute to a collective of usually negative responses to grace. Individual responses do not occur in a vacuum or within a protective bubble. Dynamics of social conformity nearly always create a collective response to grace within which aberrant individual responses are in tension, if they are not overwhelmed. But, in spite of the fact that habitual collective responses can become ingrained, these seldom dominate completely. Any group or context of persons will likely include a wide variety of individual responses to grace and responses to others. Any ministry sensitive to the collective and individual dynamics of grace must take this tension and variety into account.

A fourth implication rises from the three previous, combined with the fact people do actually experience saving faith. Wesley believed prevenient grace is not just a polarizing force, but that it brings people to the definite realization of its goal. This raises the question of what happens to those persons who have not only responded positively to grace, but have followed the "pull" into the experience of the "new birth."

Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace creates an appreciation and respect for human contextuality which runs throughout the whole of his theology of ministry. In this, the impact of the doctrine of prevenient grace extends beyond what might seem its "usual" borders in that it informs the Christian experience after as well as before saving faith. Although in "new birth" a person experiences significant changes, both in relationship with God and personal character, Wesley saw no significant changes in the ties with one's context(s). The same dynamics that affected -- both positively and negatively -- a person's journey toward faith will continue to affect his or her continuing journey toward full salvation.

Paradoxically, it is the doctrine of prevenient grace which led Wesley to address so specifically, and with such intense concern the needs of Christians after they receive saving faith. Now as much as in Wesley's day, a ministry rooted in the doctrine of prevenient grace must address the implications of "new born" Christians continuing to live amid a number of predominantly grace-resistent contexts. What does a serious view of contextuality imply for the survival of saving faith?

Just as important, to Wesley and to present ministry in his mode,

are the questions of how a personal, individual saving faith is to impact one's context(s). What should be the Christian's response to other individuals within these contexts? What should be his or her relationship with these contexts as wholes? What should be the relationship between the new context of gathered Christians and the various other collective entities which make up one's world?

Although it is beyond the scope of this study to answer these questions in detail, it is significant to see how the doctrine of prevenient grace makes them central and unavoidable. Within other missiological models these questions can be relegated to second-class status, but not so in any model that is true to Wesley.

The preceding four main implications are drawn in primarily abstract, conceptual terms. It may be helpful, before continuing any further, to introduce one of the better-known graphic models in the missiological literature which seems suited to address some of the same concerns. Its strength lies in its visual quality, and in its ability to provide some key terminology that will aid further discussion. The contemporary applications of "set theory" developed by missionary anthropologist Paul G. Hiebert may shed more light on the the polarizing influence of grace, in individuals, groups, and the interaction of the two.

Prevenient Grace and the "Centered Set" Model

In 1978, Hiebert published an article entitled, "Conversion, Culture and Cognitive Categories." In simplest terms his primary con-

cern was to understand what sort of criteria configuration would be most helpful in making the problematic distinction between those persons who belong in the "set" called "Christians" and those in the "set" called "non-Christians." Drawing from research in "set theory," he explained a key difference between grouping people or objects within "bounded sets" and "centered sets" (26).

Bounded sets "have certain structural characteristics," and categories are "defined by a clear boundary." These boundaries are usually statically defined. For example, the set of all persons who hold British passports is a bounded set. Person or objects within bounded sets are usually 100% "uniform in their essential characteristics," regardless of how these might be defined (26).

"Centered sets," on the other hand, are "created by defining a center, and the relationship of things to that center" (28). Within a centered set the focus, not the boundary, remains fixed. The relationships of objects to that center are defined both statically, in terms of distance, and dynamically, in terms of both the "angle" of orientation and speed of movement toward or away from the center. "Some things may be far from the center, but they are moving towards the center, therefore, they are part of the centered set" (28). For example, a group of people who, with varying degrees of enthusiasm and various level of skill, all love to play golf, would be a centered set in Hiebert's sense of the word.

Of the two set models considered, certain advantages seem to lie with the centered set model in trying to conceptualize dynamics of Christian conversion. Centered sets provide just as clear a distinction

between set members and non-members as do bounded sets, but without having to focus on establishing and maintaining a boundary. Clearly, a single center is more easily defined, and more easily retained, than an often complex construction of boundaries. It might seem that meaningful distinctions cannot truly exist within centered sets. However, even without explicitly drawn lines, a strong functional boundary still exists -- "so long as the center is clear" (28). Therefore, given 1) the prominence of Christ as the "center" of Christian faith, 2) the dynamic nature of Christian growth (or decline), and 3) the tremendous plurality of boundaries often confusing the issue of divine-human relations, Hiebert understandably offers the centered set as the preferred model (28-29).

Hiebert's model seems very like what has already been discussed above in the analysis of a Wesleyan concept of contextuality. In one of his concluding paragraphs Hiebert makes a statement which might appear to have been taken out of Wesley's own writings: "[E]very decision a Christian makes, not only his decision to become a Christian, must take Christ into account. Every decision throughout life moves him toward Christ or slows him down" (Wesley might have added, "or turns him away.") (29).

Hiebert's conception of the centered set seems remarkably congenial to Wesley's dynamic, goal-oriented concept of full salvation. In light of this similarity, Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace might make a helpful addition to a centered set model. It could be seen as a sort of "gravitational pull" drawing persons toward Christ, the "center." Prevenient grace, paired with genuine human freedom of

response, could help to account for the dynamic character of the centered set model. However, such a combination of Hiebert and Wesley must be made with caution.

In adding the Weselyan concept of prevenient grace as a gravitational pull it would be important to clarify the specific nature of the set's center. To be true to Wesley, the Christ at the center of the gravitational pull of prevenient grace must be first and fundamentally the crucified, redeeming Christ of the "new birth." The experience of saving faith was always fundamental and primary to Wesley's thinking. Here the goal-specific quality of prevenient grace and the particular interpretation of full, present salvation stressed in chapter nine is crucial to remember. Recall Wesley's conviction that only <u>after</u> the experience of saving faith can Christians focus, with anything but racking failure and frustration, on the ultimate center of Christ the sanctifier. Likewise Wesley would not have acknowledged any other type of Christ concept as the legitimate gravitational center of prevenient grace. The priamry issue of human sinfulness and rebellion must be addressed first.

Whether Wesley had any such model in mind or not, it is interesting to consider ways in which a similar centered vs. bounded concept of Christianity seemed to guide his approach to ministry. The following chapter will analyze Wesley's approach to ministry in light of the contextual implications of prevenient grace discussed above. Both the analysis and the conclusions will refer to the images and terminology of Hiebert's model. Before continuing, however, let us summarize what has been developed to this point.

Summary

The application of Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace to collective human experience creates a universal "sub-context" which he would have seen as common to and underlying all other contexts, no matter how they were defined. This sub-context of varying responses to grace was the point of Wesley's greatest concern in ministry among both the prosperous and the poor, the illiterate and the elite, the Irish and the Welsh, black West Indian slave and white British planter.[1]

Having posited the existence of this sub-context created by prevenient grace, however, it is important to observe the fact that Wesley was also keenly aware that this sub-context could only find expression

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1. On January 17th, 1758, Wesley preached to a special "drawing room" meeting arranged in order that Nathaniel Gilbert, a wealthy West Indian planter, might hear the Methodist message. Gilbert's brother had been converted under Methodist care and had arranged the meeting. Wesley recorded the event as follows (Jackson, Works 2:433):

> In the morning I preached at Mr. Gilbert's house. Two Negro servants of his and a Mulatto appear to be much awakened. Shall not His saving health be made known to all nations?

The following is F. Deaville Walker's (1933:29) account of what took place (Note: Walker mistakenly sets the date as February 17):

> Nathaniel Gilbert was present, accompanied by three of his slaves -- two Negro women and a Mulatto. In that little service Mr. Gilbert entered upon a new religious experience, and the Negresses were converted. Nine months later Wesley rode out to Wandsworth [where Gilbert was staying] to baptize the two women. In his journal [Wesley] wrote: "One of them is deeply convicted of sin; the other rejoices in God her Saviour, and is the first African Christian I have known". (see Jackson, Works 2:464)

Gilbert later returned to Antigua, resigned his position in local government, and devoted himself full-time to preaching to the West Indian Black population.

in the categories of more external interpersonal interaction. He recognized that persons act out their responses to grace in their responses to persons and their larger contextual setting. This is all the more true since Wesley equated the goal of grace with love, which can only be expressed relationally. As we will consider in more detail, he was remarkably sensitive to contextual issues, to the close relationship between individuals and their environment, and to the power of group dynamics.

Condensing what has been said so far, a Wesleyan perspective on persons in context derives from the following convictions:

1) All persons are hopelessly fallen and, aside from the specific intervention of God, destined to remain in prideful atagonism to God's claims upon their lives.

2) By virtue of Christ's atonement re-creation into the full image of God is a live option for all.

3) Prevenient grace seeks to create in all persons a repentant openness to this re-creation process, which begins with the gift of saving faith.

4) The combined impact of the Atonement and prevenient grace places all people in a fundamentally positive or negative relationship with God.

5) Their response to the many creative overtures of prevenient grace in active cooperation or conflict determines the character of this relationship with God.

6) Any given group of people, at any given time, is made up of a mixture of such individual responses to grace.

7) All persons respond to grace under the influence of others who are likewise responding to grace, and each other.

8) These responses to prior overtures of grace are what prepare persons to receive or reject the explicit Gospel message.

9) This whole complex of previous divine-human interaction creates a fundamental sub-context which underlies all other collective human dynamics.

10) Ministry in a Weslayan mode must address the many implications of this subcontext, in it presentation of the Gospel, its response to seekers, its provision for nurture of new Christians, and their subsequent relationship to the many grace-resistant contexts of the world.

The following chapter will explore how these affirmations were visible in Wesley's approach to ministry.

CHAPTER 11

CONTEXTUAL IMPLICATIONS OF PREVENIENT GRACE GUIDING WESLEY'S MINISTRY METHODS

Introduction

In part two we looked at how the doctrine of prevenient grace seemed to influence Wesley and the early Methodist missionaries in their approach to world evangelization. We considered some of the implications of the assumption that God not only wants all people to be saved, but that he is at work in all peoples trying to accomplish this purpose. This chapter takes a simliar approach, but with a tighter focus upon Wesley's practical understanding of group dynamics -- what might be called in missiological terms, his concept of contextuality.

Wesley's ministry covered a wide variety of cultures and socio-economic contexts in the Britain of his day. The success of early Methodism is testimony to a remarkable sensitivity for the specific dynamics, needs and concerns of each. Yet the result of his ministry was almost universally the restructuring of these contexts and of the patterns of people's relating to their previous networks. Our present task is to explore Wesley's understanding of how people fit into their contexts in light of his concept of prevenient grace. How did he interpret and make use of these patterns of contextuality to further the cause of the gospel? What might this suggest for missions today?

Our approach in answering these questions will involve a look at

what Wesley did and said. This data will then be evaluated in light of some of the categories developed in the last chapter, particularly a modification of Hiebert's "centered set" model. We will conclude with some summary implicational statements concerning the principles that seem to emerge from this analysis of Wesley's methods.

More Than Proclamation

The fact that in Wesley's eyes all people were candidates for full salvation and life-transforming "new birth" meant that all should have a chance to hear the Gospel, the provision and invitation of Christ communicated in explicit form. As discussed in part two, this perspective informed Wesley's global vision and motivated him with a remarkable intensity to preach and teach. This zeal for preaching Wesley shared with others, such as his colleague, George Whitefield, who was perhaps the most well-known preacher of his day both in England and in America. However, there was a distinctive character in Wesley's approach to ministry which raises questions. It was the formation of the Methodist "bands," "societies," and "class-meetings," not the widespread public preaching, which distinguished his ministry.[1]

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1. Volume nine of the bicentennial edition of Wesley's Works is entirely devoted to the literature surrounding "The Methodist Societies." That the formation of these groups deserves such prominence in an analysis of Wesley's ministry can be supported by Wesley's own words, quoted by one of his biographers:

> This is the great work: not only to bring souls to believe in Christ, but to build them up in our most holy faith. How grievously are they mistaken who imagine that as soon as the children are born they need take no more care of them! We

Following soon after his experience of saving faith, Wesley went to Bristol to follow-up and extend Whitefield's dynamic ministry in that area. Whitefield had already begun preaching out of doors, and here Wesley too adopted this "vile," and certainly for him, humiliating method of ministry (A. Wood 1967:94-95). The fact that the public response was often energetically positive presented Wesley with a challenge: what to do with those who seemed interested in following up the implications of the Gospel message. Wherever Wesley preached there were consistently among his hearers those who were not only moved by the message, but also intentionally seeking to find salvation as Wesley had presented it. Such was the case in London, early in Wesley's ministry (Works 9:69):

> In the latter end of the year 1739 eight or ten persons came to me in London who appeared to be deeply convinced of sin, and earnestly groaning for redemption. They desired (as did two or three more the next day) that I would spend some time with them in prayer, and advise them how to flee from the wrath to come, which they saw continually hanging over their head. That we might have more time for this great work I appointed a day when they might all come together, which from thenceforth they did every week, namely, on Thursday, in the evening. To these and as many more as desired to join them (for their number increased daily), I gave those advices from time to time which I judged most needful for them; and we always concluded our meeting with prayer suited to their several necessities.
>
> This was the rise of the United Society, first in London, and then in other places. Such a society is no other than a company of men "having the form, and seeking the power of godliness," united to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation.

This idea of gathering seekers together was not at all new to

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.Continued.

> do not find it so. The chief care then begins" (A. Wood 1967:186)

Wesley. In fact his own spiritual journey had begun years before with the gathering of a few friends at Oxford who shared a common hunger for deeper spirituality (Works 9:5). Wesley was convinced from his own experience that people needed the assistance of like-minded companions, not only to seek salvation, but also to maintain and encourage each other in faith. In response to the question, "Is it advisable for us to preach in as many places as we can, without forming any societies?" Wesley responded: "By no means. We have made the trial in various places; and that for a considerable time. There is scarcely any fruit remaining" (Jackson, Works 8:300).

This conviction lay behind the organization of the Methodist structure of small groups, and set Wesley apart from other evangelicals. Reflecting on their respective ministries, Whitefield acknowledged: "My brother Wesley acted wisely. The souls that were awakened under his ministry he joined in class, and thus preserved the fruit of his labour. This I neglected, and my people are as a rope of sand" (A. Wood 1967:188).

Group Dynamics of "Awakening" Sinners

The metaphor "awakened" is very appropriate and compatible with Wesley's theology of ministry. Wesley believed that sin not only damaged the person's relationship with God, it also had a stupefying effect on the life of the spirit, such that few persons were less aware of their need for salvation than an intentional, habitual sinner. These first needed to be "awakened" to the gravity of their condition before they could even seek God. However, Wesley believed that people "awak-

ened" very grudgingly and groggily; and all too quickly they "fell asleep" again, usually into a deeper sleep than the one they enjoyed before (Curnock, Journal 5:26):

> I was more convinced than ever that the preaching like an apostle, without joining together those that are awakened and training them up in the ways of God, is only begetting children for the murderer (i.e. the devil). How much preaching has there been for these twenty years all over Pembrokeshire! But no regular societies, no discipline, no order or connexion; and the consequence is that nine in ten of the once-awakened are now faster asleep than ever.

The purpose of prevenient grace, assisted by the explicit preaching and persuasion of the Gospel, was first to awaken sleeping sinners. Yet Wesley believed that the only way these could stay awake long enough to find salvation was to bind them together, so that they could profit from each other's first restless stirrings. Left unassisted to stay awake within a largely slumbering society, few awakened sinners could maintain spiritual consciousness.[1] For Wesley, this image was vivid and real, such that he could exclaim from the heart, "O what shoals of half-awakened sinners will be broad awaken when it is too late" (Curnock, Journal 7:272)!

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1. In his "Plain Account of the Methodists," Wesley describes the response of some of his first hearers, and his recognition of their need for mutual support against the negative influence of their surroundings:

> One and another and another came to us, asking what they should do, being distressed on every side, as everyone strove to weaken, and none to strengthen their hands in God. We advised them: "Strengthen you one another. Talk together as often as you can. And pray earnestly with and for one another, that you may 'endure to the end and be saved'." Against this advice we presumed there could be no objection, as being grounded on the plainest reason, and on so many Scriptures, both of the Old Testament and the New, that it would be tedious to recite them (Works 9:256).

Group Dynamics of the "New Birth"

Wesley' presentation of the Gospel was not calculated to produce instantaneous conversion experiences. Accounts of these were relatively rare (A. Wood 1967:163). Far more common were accounts of widespread emotional affect, but only a few "serious" penitents intentionally seeking saving faith. Some of these would seek conversation and prayer with Wesley after the meetings,[1] and sometimes Wesley would hold an informal "after-meeting." These, however were not usually so much for the purpose of leading the seekers to saving faith, but to simply instruct them about the formation of a society: "[A]fter preaching, I desired all those who determined to serve God to meet me apart from the great congregation. To these I explained the design, nature, and use of Christian societies" (Curnock, Journal 3:430)

Wesley did not seem to expect fast or easy conversions. In fact, he seemed suspicious of them. The place to find saving faith was in the context of like-minded seekers and those who have already found. Wesley's small groups could be compared in this regard to a hatchery incubator. It was Wesley's plan that conversion take place in a setting that would first encourage the process of "new birth," and then provide nurture and support for the vulnerable spiritual infant. It was an

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1. Wesley records such an instance in his journal (Curnock, Journal 3:454):

> A poor sinner indeed followed me, one who was broken in pieces by the convincing Spirit, and uttered such cries as pierced the hearts of all that heard. We poured out our souls before God in prayer, and light sprung up in her heart.

ideal configuration, for nothing strengthens new-born faith more than being a part of encouraging and seeing the same experience in others.

Because these groups were so crucial to Wesley's understanding of the salvation process, he guarded them carefully, not only in terms of who could join them, but also who could remain in them. He made neither aspect particularly easy. Often Wesley invited those who felt moved by the preaching to come to an early morning meeting the next day. Attendance at an uncomfortable hour was "one of the signs that encouraged Wesley to think a real work of God had been begun in a sinner's heart." A. Skevington Wood considered this also a "fair test, and a straight answer to the charge of undue emotionalism. It takes more than titillated feelings to induce someone to stand in the open air early on an autumn morning, listening to a clergyman" (1967:165). Of such an occasion Wesley wrote, "The number of those who came at five in the morning showed that God had touched many hearts" (Curnock, Journal 4:288).

The preaching of faith as a gift, not a choice, the prospect of a protracted spiritual birth process, the invitation to join a small group of other seekers -- often meeting at odd hours, had a distinctive culling effect on those who responded to Wesley's preaching. Of the thousands who attended, only some would be moved; of these, only some would respond; of these, only some would commit to joining with others; of these, still fewer would actually do it; and within this select group, only some would experience saving faith at any one time. Wesley's journal entry for June 15, 1739 records this description of a meeting with those who had seemed to find peace with God the night before, but were being banded together for nurture (Curnock, Journal 2:222):

> Twenty-six of those who had thus been affected (most of whom, during prayers which had been made for them, were in a moment filled with peace and joy) promised to call upon me the next day. But only eighteen came; by talking closely with whom I found reason to believe that some of them had gone home to their house justified [the night before] The rest seemed to waiting patiently for it.

Presumably this little band remained together. If so, it remained for a while the mixture of those who had in fact "gone home to their house justified," and those who were still "waiting patiently for it" that was characteristic of other such Methodist groups. Both those who had found justifying faith and those who had not, shared one common characteristic, namely their intent focus on Christ and the desire for saving faith and full salvation. In every sense, this group meets the description of one of Hiebert's "centered sets," in spite of the varying "distances" of each member from the center.

Contextual Redefinition in Wesley's Small Groups

Within the Methodist societies, the sub-context defined by a committed positive responses to grace became the primary context. The most obvious fruit of this fundamental contextual redefinition was that the distinctions between members relative to other contextual boundaries -- social class, race, or economic status -- were eclipsed.

This was not an accidental byproduct of the revival, but quite intentional and strictly enforced. The unifying effect of Christ and the desire for salvation was meticulously maintained by Wesley's rules for the societies. These served first to bring the one goal of their formation into crystal clarity, and to enforce the implications of each

member's voluntary commitment to that goal.[1] In creating such a tightly focused "centered set," Wesley effectively drew strong implicit boundary lines between his small groups and the rest of the world. The fact that he also explicitly described what such a centered focus would look like in application would later lead to the trouble usually associated with a "bounded set" model.[2]

The creation of these small groups or "societies" automatically created a tension within the existing structures of 18th-century Brit-

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1. Wesley believed that commitment to the goal of salvation would have distinct fruits in the lives of the truly sincere.

> There is only one condition previously required in those who desire admission into this Society, "a desire to flee the from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins." But wherever this desire is fixed in the soul it will be shown by its fruits. It is therefore expected of all who continue therein that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation (Works 9:256-257).

Here Wesley lists what he saw as the most basic indicators or "fruits" of desire "fixed in the soul." Abridged to their larger headings they are:

> I. Carefully to abstain from all doing evil;
> II. Zealously to maintain good works;
> III. Constantly to attend all the ordinances of God (Works 9:79).

2. Henry D. Rack has published an informative study addressing some of these issues entitled, "The Decline of the Class-Meeting and the Problem of Church-Membership in Nineteenth-Century Wesleyanism" (1973). He sees them as vulnerable from the start to the abuses which eventually led to their decline: "Of all these groups it might be said that they were in trouble almost from the start" (12).

Following his analysis, it seems one of the primary problems was a loss of focus on the center, and a preoccupation with the boundaries. The unifying potentials inherent in the "sub-context" of grace-response were soon eclipsed by divisions of class, education, and economic status. Rack sees this transition as almost inevitable given the fact that unity follows initial spiritual energy in that it too always wears off (14-15).

ain.[1] Although such voluntary societies were not at all uncommon in 18th-century England (Works 2:300), the fact that Wesley's ran counter to many of the dominant values of both secular society and the Anglican church left them vulnerable to attack from many sides. In his "Advice to the People called Methodists," Wesley told them to expect to offend the status quo, particularly because of their small group formation (Works 9:128):

> What makes even your principles more offensive is this uniting of yourselves together, because this union renders you more conspicuous, placing you more in the eye of men; more suspicious -- I mean, liable to be suspected of carrying on some sinister design. . . .
>
> This offense will sink the deeper because you are gathered out of so many other congregations. For warm [excitable] men in each will not easily be convinced that you do not despise either them or their teachers; nay will probably imagine that you utterly condemn them, as though they could not be saved. . . .
>
> Add to this that you do not leave them quite, you still rank yourselves among their members, which, to those who know not that you do it for consciences' sake, is also a provoking circumstance. "If you would but get out of their sight!" But you are a continual thorn in their side as long as you remain with them.
>
> And (which cannot but anger them more) you have neither power, nor riches, nor learning; yet, with all their power and money and wisdom, they can gain no ground against you.

This quotation summarizes many of the characteristics of Wesley's groups, but it also focuses on the fact that for all their separateness, the Methodists were never called to separate themselves totally from society. Again, the definition of salvation in terms of love was a constant thrust back into the world. Although many Christian virtues could

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1. Gordon Rupp's succinct discussion of eighteenth-century British class dynamics in relation to the Methodist revival can be found in the introduction to volume nine of Wesley's Works (23-29).

be practiced in the warmth and protection of the Methodist societies, most of them call Christians into daily dynamic interaction with non-Christians (Works 1:534). Maintaining the correct balance in this interaction was a strong concern of Wesley's, reflected particularly in three sermons: "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount" IV, "On Friendship with the World," and "In What Sense Are We to Leave the World?"

Wesley's Inter-Contextual Balance

These sermons reflect quite clearly Wesley's view of the close connection between persons and their social contexts which powerfully formed his theology and practice of ministry. The reason for the grouping of people together was that individuals are always strongly impacted by their relationships to others. The influence of others need not be intentional to be inevitable. In arguing this point Wesley compares social influences to the contagious character of a disease; it spreads regardless of the intention of the sick person (Works 3:134ff). Although Wesley is using this as a warning against the influence of non-Christians, the same dynamics apply positively to strengthen and nourish the members of the Methodist societies.

Recognizing the need for caution and limits in interacting with people who are in resistance to grace, Wesley also fears any kind of monasticism or solitary Christianity (Works 1:532):

> Many eminent men have . . . advised us . . . to withdraw from the world; to abstract ourselves from all sensible things . . . . [T]his [is] the fairest of all the devices wherewith Satan hath ever perverted the right ways of the Lord!

In response to this "masterpiece of wisdom from beneath" Wesley argues

that "Christianity is essentially a social religion, and to turn it into a solitary one is to destroy it." He continues (Works 1:533-534):

> When I say this is essentially a social religion, I mean not only that it cannot subsist so well, but that it cannot subsist at all without society, without living and conversing with other men.

While Wesley is intent that Methodist Christians should shine brightly in a darkened world, he realized that the influence is bilateral, and that their faith was vulnerable to deceptively gradual erosion when exposed to the influence of non-believers (Works 3:146-147):

> It is probable [commerce with ungodly persons] will not immediately have any apparent visible ill consequences. It is hardly expected that it will immediately lead us into any outward sin . . . . [But] it will first sap the foundations of our religion; it will by little and little damp our zeal for God; it will gently cool that fervency of spirit which attended our first love. If they do not openly oppose anything we say or do, yet their very spirit will by insensible degrees affect our spirit, and transfuse into it the same lukewarmness and indifference toward God and the things of God . . . .
>
> By the same degrees all needless intercourse with unholy men will weaken our divine evidence and conviction of things unseen; it will dim the eyes of the soul, whereby we see him that is invisible, and weaken our confidence in him . . . . It will gradually . . . deaden [our] hope [and] cool that flame of love which enabled us to say: "Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee! Thus it strikes at the root of all vital religion, our fellowship with the Father and with the Son.

What Wesley was here warning against had apparently become a reality in the increasingly "acceptable" Methodist revival, coupled with the growing prosperity of its members (Works 3:126). Wesley's word-choice evokes the image of a lost or obscured "center," to return once again to Hiebert's model. The vitality of the individual Christian life, for Wesley, was contingent upon a clear faith-given "vision" of Christ as Saviour (Hiebert 1978:28); and this could only be sustained by

individuals supported within a "set" of like-minded people. Not only was individual loss of faith to be feared, but a collective, group loss of "center" would be even more destructive, as it would tend to destroy its members. The inseparable holism of individual and group dynamics demand constant watchfulness and protection, since what compromises one threatens all.

The mark of such a loss of center on a collective level would be the disintegration of unity. If the one thing that all members share in common is compromised, or loses its primacy, the next most prominent identity-giving center will dominate and split the group into factions. In a centered-set group, external boundaries are not strong enough to overcome the stress created by the emergence of multiple alternative centers of focus.

The fact that the Methodist societies were "artificial" collections of people who might, and often did, have only their hunger for God in common, left them particularly vulnerable to this sort of disintegrative process. With considerable effort, both prevenient grace and Wesley's efforts had carved out a new context for relationship within a society already rich in other, conflicting contexts. This new context was not simply an alternative, but it also claimed a dominance not easily accepted by human habit and societal norms. Rack's analysis of the decline of the groups due to their challenge to accepted social class lines supports this interpretation. Notice the significance he places on the obfuscation of the unifying, dynamic faith experience (1973:14-14):

> A further source of social tension, again aggravated by the

> decline of the authority of a common, shared experience, was the mixture of social classes in the class [small group] already referred to. It was possible in early and even in later Methodism to find in the class not only a mixture of social classes but a reversal of their roles as leader and led which obtained in the world outside. . . . [I]t was sometimes the case in the world of the class-meeting that the leader, chosen for his spiritual gifts, could be exercising a certain pastoral authority over those higher in the social scale than himself. In the more intense phase of a new religious movement, some degree of overcoming social distinctions of this kind is possible; in the later stages it begins to create difficulties. And it is becoming increasingly evident in recent research that at least some of the reasons for the splits in nineteenth-century Wesleyanism has a secular foundation in social and political tension.

Rack's analysis corresponds with what Aylward Shorter calls "culturalism": a common process of spiritual decay in which "culture gains, as it were, the upper hand, undermining or distorting the values of the Gospel" (1988:12). The universality of this phenomenon throughout church history, and certainly no less in the Wesleyan revival, is due to the fact that Christians continue to live in multiple contexts, each making strong demands for personal loyalty. Wesley believed that Christian survival depended on two potentially conflicting social responses to grace; 1) the call to go into the multiple contexts of the world in witness and service, and 2) the constant need for separation, nurture and rejuvenation within their new, Christ-centered context.

For Wesley, the only way a person could do the former was by rigid commitment to the latter. All interaction within the other contexts of human relationships must be strongly based on the foundation of the primary Christ-centered focus. This was only maintained in community. It involved a kind of protective separation between the "world" and the Christ-centered community. Should the dominant contextual categories, centers and boundaries of the world ever infiltrate the Christian commu-

nity, first the solidarity of the group would be threatened. But with this, there would be no hope for the survival of individuals in dynamic faith. With the weakening of faith, the potential for the kind of inter-contextual dialogue that might lead to transforming witness would not last. Soon the balance would tip, and the influence of the "world" would dominate the Christian. Clearly, much was at stake in the preservation of the Christ-centered support groups.

This explains Wesley's many strong warnings that one never lose sight of the only legitimate goal for interaction with the "world."[1] Again, for Wesley, the ultimate goal of full salvation for all persons must be the controlling principle that not only binds Christians together, but which also determines the nature and extent of their relationship with persons of the "world." These two considerations deserve more detailed explanation.

First, Wesley was concerned to maintain the distinctive, solitary focus of the Methodist movement on Christ and, in him, the hope of full salvation. It was to be not only distinctive, but dominant, such that all other foci became secondary. Rack's description of the disintegra-

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1. This Wesley defined negatively as all those persons of whom it cannot be said that they "love God, or at least 'fear him, and keep his commandments'." He continues (Works 3:130):

> This is the lowest character of those that "are of God," who are not properly sons, but servants; who "depart from evil," and study to do good, and walk in his ordinances, because they have the fear of God in their heart, and a sincere desire to please him. Fix in your heart this plain meaning of the term "the world" -- those who do not thus fear God. Let no man deceive you with vain words: it means neither more nor less than this.

tion of the Methodist class meeting is a portrait of Wesley's worst nightmare. For, once the central focus and its implied discipline was compromised, the small groups would certainly fall apart, and with them all hope for the survival of the kind of Christianity Wesley envisioned.

It is interesting that Rack's explanation of the decline of the Methodist small groups supports Donald McGavran's "homogeneous unit principle," which affirms that "Christian like to become Christian without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers" (1980:223). While this is doubtless true as an observation, Wesley would have considered it unacceptable as a norm for ministry methods.[1] This loyalty to other contextual alliances was the very sort of "natural" (read sinful) inclination that the power of the Gospel was designed to correct. Wesley believed that the wholehearted pursuit of Christ alone, coupled with the group dynamics of shared experiences of the same saving faith should create a context that demands the subjection of all other contexts to secondary status. In relation to Christ-the-center, all other distinctions between persons have no place.

Theologically and theoretically this perspective is clear from Wesley's writings and his vision for a global Methodism (Works 2:485). Practically, it was also clearly his intention, although, as history has shown, in this Wesley may have been asking for too much. George G. Hunter III, agrees with Wesley that culturally (or otherwise) "heterogeneous churches more effectively model the kingdom of God and what the

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1. Recall from chapter eight, Joshua Marsden's intentionally integrated ministry in Bermuda, in which affluent Whites were boldly called to worship with their former slaves, even though this emphasis at first resulted in only limited responsiveness.

church is intended to be." However, he suggests that "in a world of practical tradeoffs" some temporary concessions might need to be made (1987:175). With the latter statement, even the pragmatic Wesley would not have agreed. The radically unifying aspect of Christian salvation, properly understood in terms of whole-hearted "love for God and man," was for Wesley a non-negotiable (Works 9:35-42; Works 2:79). It must have full expression from the very start as opposed to being saved for some later stage of Christian maturity.

As mentioned earlier, the strength of the alternative Christ-centered community came from its unity of focus. But one of the primary purposes of this group solidarity was to provide a sufficiently secure base from which persons could interact redemptively with the "world," without jeopardizing their faith in the process. Wesley felt that there is more danger of persons being drawn too much into commerce with the world, rather than too little; and he seems to fear nothing more for the Methodists. He lists several pages of dire consequences that will spring from contact with the "world" which is not properly guided and protected by commitment to Christian goals. Any such personal contact[1] must be intentionally directed toward "awakening" such persons and inspiring them to seek God. It should also be undertaken for only a limited amount of time. Wesley offers the following summary paragraph (Works 3:150-151):

> Such are the consequences which must surely, though perhaps slowly, follow the mixing of the children of God with the

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1. Wesley is here giving advice to the average Methodist layman, and not addressing the explicit proclamation of the Gospel in preaching.

> men of the world. And by this means more than by any other, yea, than by all others put together, are the people called Methodist likely to lose their strength and become like other men. It is indeed with good design, and from a real desire of promoting the glory of God, that many of them admit of familiar conversation with men that know not God. You have a hope of awakening them out of sleep, and persuading them to seek the things that make for their peace. But if after a competent time of trial you can make no impression upon them, it will be your wisdom to give them up to God. Otherwise you are more likely to receive hurt from them than to do them any good. For if you do not raise their hearts up to heaven, they will draw yours down to earth. Therefore retreat in time, and "come out from among them, and be ye separate." (emphasis added)

Summary

From the previous discussion it is clear that Wesley had a remarkable sensitivity for power of group dynamics, and the real concerns of human "contextuality." However, within these sensitivities the dominance of the divine-human context remains clear. The reason that he treats group dynamics with such intentional care is that he regards them as essential to realization of the goal of full salvation in Christ. It is possible to interpret Wesley's theology and practice of ministry in terms of a careful analysis of forces. Given 1) the relational quality of all human experience, 2) the limited power of prevenient grace only to persuade and assist, and 3) the strong counter-current of collective, ingrained rejection of grace, he realizes that only a careful balance of individual and collective dynamics can lead to the kind of transforming, lasting, and contagious salvation envisioned in the Scripture.

Wesley's particular balance of these forces may not be the only viable possibility, but it seems to have been remarkably successful, both theologically and experientially -- as long as it kept its focus on

the "center." As the previous considerations reveal, the dynamics that challenged the Wesleyan revival are not alien to present missiological concerns. Closing this chapter we will attempt to abstract both theological and functional principles from Wesley's approach to ministry to persons within their various contexts, in hopes that some of these may be applicable today. To do this we will return to the categories developed in Hiebert's discussion of sets, mentioned in the previous chapter, then conclude with some summary observations on the principles of Wesley's methodology.

Implications of Wesley's Modified "Centered-Set" Approach to Evangelization

As discussed above, Wesley saw the potential for a life-transforming love relationship with God to be the most relevant aspect of the human condition. The atoning work of Christ has put all persons into an unavoidable relationship with God, characterized by two primary options: prideful resistance, or humble receptivity to the infinitely various and all-pervasive overtures of prevenient grace (Nausner 1989:47). All other human needs and capacities take second place to this relationship with God; all human activity is evaluated from its perspective. Although the connection between the mundane choices of life and the implications of God's offer of salvation are often obscure, every attitude, thought, word, or deed is characterized by its alignment with the constant flow of grace.

Because human behavior is largely controlled by habit, each choice for or against grace reinforces and influences the next, to the extent

that resistance to grace can become ingrained as a way of life, in individuals and collectively in society. These collective patterns of response to grace in turn influence the choices of individuals, making it almost impossible for persons in isolation within a grace-resistent context to make the significant series of choices in the direction that would lead to their salvation. For the same reason, the collective power of persons intentionally aligned with the purposes of prevenient grace can support and encourage persons within any context to follow God's order of salvation to the point of saving faith, and beyond to the perfection of their love for God and humanity.

In condensed form, these principles seem to be the guiding force behind Wesley's theology and practice of ministry. They account for both his initial efforts in Gospel proclamation, and his very intentional provision for "pre-natal" and "post-natal" care of new Christians (A. Wood 1967:186). How did they express themselves in practice?

First, Wesley's assumption of a preexisting relationship with God, awaiting its fulfillment in all persons, motivated his wide-spread, all-inclusive preaching efforts.

Second, it also accounted for his consistent focus in preaching. The fact that all persons were potentially able to know, here and now, the glory of a love relationship with God and their fellows, and thereby be prepared for eternity with God, made this his primary emphasis. He stressed the need for, the process toward, the potential threats to, the

means to maintain, and the multiple implications of this salvation.[1] All things unrelated to this salvation were to Wesley of secondary concern, and unworthy of the attention of a Christian.

Third, the fact that 1) the dominant response to prevenient grace's many overtures is habitually negative, that "the generality of men stifle them as soon as possible," and 2) the individual among this "generality of men" stands little chance of doing anything other than following suit, led Wesley to a specific approach to preaching.

His concern was to make the most of the special "break" in ordinary life created by the preaching moment. By his own confession, Wesley sought 1) to align his message with the preexisting, awakening and encouraging influence of prevenient grace, 2) to proclaim and offer Jesus Christ as the answer to human need, 3) to invite, to persuade, to challenge "sinners to 'enter into the holiest' by the 'new and living way'" (Curnock, Journal 2:221); all for the purpose of bringing them to a verdict. "The appeal had to be pressed home in a personal manner, so that the hearer was left feeling that the protective covering of neutrality and indifference had been stripped off, and the decisive moment had arrived" (A. Wood 1967:157; 147). The way Wesley interpreted and dealt with what happened after that "decisive moment" by forming them into groups indicates his vision of its purpose.

The fourth implication derives from the same analysis group dynamics. Wesley saw the need not only to awaken, challenge, and invite

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1. "This, then, is the doctrinal agenda of Methodism, the study of sin, faith, works, assurance, sanctification, and their links with Christian living" (Baker 1987:11).

sinners, but also to separate those who were now aligning themselves with prevenient grace, in order that he might incorporate them for mutual support, encouragement, and growth. Only in a corporate setting did Wesley believe it was safe to bring new Christians into being. And, although he recognized the exceptional occurrence, Wesley doubted the possibility of a genuine experience of saving faith, in isolation.

Much more intensely he doubted the possibility of Christian survival in isolation. Only in relationship with others can one maintain one's vision of the "center." Although each person experiences a uniquely one-to-one moment of contact with Christ in the gift of saving faith, this moment should be surrounded -- before, during and after -- by the supportive care of others. This perspective balances both individualistic and corporate concepts of conversion.

Combining Wesley's more pastoral corporate emphasis with his prophetic evangelical emphasis on Christians being shining lights in a dark world (Works 1:531), it is possible to see a fifth, slightly less explicit, implication of his theology of ministry -- one already considered in chapter two's discussion of the "general spread of the Gospel."

For Wesley, the world would be transformed through a process of expansion and inclusion. This would have both individual and collective implications. Not only would individuals come to the experience of saving faith and initial sanctification, they would be incorporated into new and growing societies. As the "frontiers" of these societies expanded with each additional member, so would the sphere of collective influence expand, and the number of individual contact points with the outside "world" increase. If, enough people could be reoriented toward

prevenient grace, such that one might say "the generality of men" follow rather than "stifle" its impulses, presumably the same group dynamics that presently drag people away from God would turn them toward him. From this perspective it was easy for Wesley to visualize the snow-ball effect which he thought would result on the world-wide spread of what had begun in the British revival.

Yet, even before all people came to be included in the expansion movement, and even before their numbers reached any such "critical mass," the beneficial impact of their increasing number would be felt upon society (Works 2:300). As Christians became more and more numerous, their love for humanity would demand their active participation in various efforts to rectify injustice, oppression, and other sins against God' created order.

Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in Wesley's efforts against slavery, for example, and the provision for schools and medical assistance in impoverished areas. Although such reforms were not "saving" in the fullest sense of the word, it was incumbent upon Christians to respond to human need, if they are to retain their own salvation. These efforts to reform society were also viewed by Wesley as potential means of calling people to the eternally-significant issues of their relationship with God.

Conclusion

Using the categories of Hiebert's centered set model, with some modifications, Wesley's approach to ministry can be condensed as follows:

Within a given group of people there are multiple contexts, definable by multiple criteria. Yet common to all persons, at all times, in all contexts is a potential for relationship with God. This potential makes Christ the center reference point within all contexts, and it automatically creates the potential for two fundamental relational alignments toward this center. The dynamic influence of prevenient grace in all persons creates a center-directed "gravitational field." In spite of its influence, habitually resistant responses to prevenient grace tend to set the members of any given context in a more or less rigid and amazingly creative antagonism toward it.

Within the centered set model, there might be two ways to interpret this antagonistic response. Due to the potency of human group dynamics, the collective influence of resistance to prevenient grace can be seen as creating a functionally equivalent <u>opposite</u> force, or an <u>alternative</u> force. In resisting the specifically Christ-centered flow of grace, and seeking to relieve the tension of purely <u>negative</u> resistance, this antagonism may take the form of a <u>positive</u> attraction toward an alternative center or centers. Of the two, the latter seems consistent with most human experience, since there are few contexts defined by purely negative responses to Christ.

Wesley visualized most people, in most contexts as thinking themselves to be either in positive or neutral orientation to "God" (variously conceived). In fact, they are in a negative and/or alternative orientation to Christ the Saviour, and comfortably unaware of it.

In light of this, the role of the Christian witness is to work within the flow of prevenient grace. Wesley believed that in spite of

various alternative centers and collective resistance, there are in any group of people persons who are in a responsive orientation to prevenient grace. Focusing on these, the goal is to strengthen the effect of prevenient grace to the point that they are able to take decisive action at some level.

Again, given the potency of group dynamics, it becomes important to try to gather and separate temporarily, those who are positively oriented to grace. This creates an alternative "set" or context defined by Christ as center, a "place" where the implications of Christ's centrality can be more fully understood and nurtured. Within this context, grace can gradually redirect the vectors of response to the point where they are fully aligned, positively moving, and gaining momentum.

Hiebert interprets this change of direction in terms of Christian "conversion." He sees the turning toward Christ as the decisive point in the Christian experience, the point at which a person becomes "Christian." In contrast, Wesley understood such turning toward Christ-the-center as an expression of repentance and the beginning of the intentional use of the "means of grace." Although this "turning" or "conversion" was necessarily prior to saving faith, and could be trusted to lead to Christ, it was not in itself true salvation. Nor is the person so "turned" properly called a real Christian.

The experience of saving faith for Wesley much more than a "conversion," or a conscious choice to reorient oneself positively toward God in willful response to the Gospel message. Saving faith is not in orientation or movement toward Christ, but in an actual "arrival," a point of personal contact. The seeker moves toward Christ in repentance

specifically in order to encounter him through faith in a real, decisive way; yet not in such a way as to arrest further growth and movement.

While Hiebert's model is a very effective picture of the function of prevenient grace, it has difficulty representing the decisive "arrival" points in Wesley's order of salvation. Wesley would have seen it as misleading and discouraging to visualize a life-long movement toward a saving relationship with God. If movement is real, it must represent actual progress. If movement is to be meaningful, there has to be the possibility of arrival. The goal in Wesley's soteriology is not located on an infinite or ever-receding horizon. Such an illusive prospect is contrary to the promise of real experiential intimacy with Christ that can be realized in real earthly time and space. No concept of always getting closer but never arriving is compatible with Wesley.

The moment of saving faith, for Wesley, is at once the end of one kind of orientation and movement, and the beginning of another. Theologically these two centers could be defined as "justification" and "sanctification." However, this would be misleading. From a Wesleyan prespective, it is the Savior himself, not spiritual experiences that stands at the center. The uniqueness of the centered set where the living Christ is the focus is that its members are not characterized by their affirmation of a doctrine or their desire for an experience, but rather by their yearning for pardoning personal contact, for the reality of a growing love relationship with a personal savior.

Following the experience of saving faith, the character of interaction is not so much movement toward, but a growing intimacy with Christ; and this is difficult to diagram. True intimacy with Christ

will lead to sanctification, just as true repentance leads to justification, but neither of these are the true center of Christian focus.

A third consideration which even more frustrates any attempt at graphic representation in Hiebert's model stems from the social implications of a love relationship with God through Christ. First, in order to be rightly focused on, and moving toward Christ, one must focus with intentional good will and practical service toward one's fellow human beings. Among the fifteen rules for seekers in Wesley's small groups only two refer directly to one's relationship with God; the others refer to interpersonal and social dynamics (Nausner 1989:49). Second, following the experience of saving faith, one is infused with a love for God, which is primarily expressed in love for his creatures.

Defying any schematic representation are the following considerations: The only way to love God is through loving his creation. But the only way to be able to truly love anything is to be loved first by God, to be captured by his love, and to become a channel of that love to others. Then the greatest expression of that love, both to God and to persons, is to bring them into their own experience of it.

One possible graphic depiction might be to visualize persons, after the experience of saving faith, <u>joining</u> Christ at the center. This might carry some of the meaning of persons "receiving the mind of Christ," or being "in Christ." However, the fundamental character of Christ is not static, but expressed in constant outreach, seeking the lost. Once again this challenges the limits of any diagram. It might be conceiveable at the point of saving faith to introduce a third dimension "inward" to represent growing depth in love. But this inward

vector would always curve "outward" again in a circle of loving outreach to others.

As noted above, the contextual implications of prevenient grace beg extension. Not surprisingly, these last considerations of the Christian's post-faith love relationships begin to run past the true object of this study, which is more concerned with the nature of prevenient grace in its pre-faith activities in all persons. To the point of the experience of saving faith the centered set model is adequate and helpful, if one allows the possibility, not only of movement toward, but of real personal contact with the Center.

In the concluding chapter we will use the preceding analysis to answer the questions asked at the beginning of this chapter regarding the implications of Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace for the missiological concerns of relating Gospel and context.

CHAPTER 12

CONCLUSION

At the end of this third part, and the termination of the larger inquiry into Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace seen from a missiological perspective, we now return to the questions asked at the beginning of chapter nine.

The first question asked how the doctrine of prevenient grace influenced the way contexts are defined, understood, and evaluated. As developed above, the atonement and prevenient grace together relativize all other human contexts. Wesley regarded the possibility of a very real divine-human relationship as more important than any other combination of intercontextual, intracontextual, interpersonal or intrapersonal dynamics. However, Wesley also realized that the divine-human relationship is largely defined by the variety of ordinary, earthly interactions. Although at a different level of significance, these "relativized" human contexts were the media of divine-human contact and communion. Conceptually the distinction is much clearer than it is in practice.

Wesley recognized that even the "interior" aspects of divine-human communion are mediated through the human mind and conditioned by human experience within the setting of many contextual configurations. The attitudes and inclinations of the heart that are so significant in Wesley's theology allow multiple expressions within the variety of human meaning systems. Therefore, although the divine-human relationship

relativizes all other human relationships, it does not trivialize them. On the contrary, the variety of human contexts, with their members and existing meaning structures, make up the stage on which the ultimately redeeming or destroying drama of divine-human relationship is acted out.

The second question asked how the doctrine of prevenient grace informs our concepts of individual persons within these contexts. On this account, Wesley's theology seems to offer a very helpful balance which gives full appreciation both to the significance of the individual and the potency of group dynamics. All persons stand in relationship both to God's prevenient grace and to the habitual, collective response of his or her immediate context to that grace. Persons remain free to respond to grace, but the existing contextual grace-responses will significantly impact and restrict the range of that individual freedom. For this reason, Wesley focused his ministry not just on reaching individuals, but in creating special alternative contexts, designed both to facilitate repentance prior to saving faith and to nurture and protect the "newborn" Christian. Although the gift of saving faith was a moment of Person-to-person encounter, it was not likely to come to a person in isolation, and was dangerously vulnerable to loss without the support of a community.

The third question asked how the explicit Gospel message relates to the previous work of God within all contexts. Here the key lies in the essential continuity between Christ as the origin of prevenient grace, given on the basis of the atonement, and Christ as the focus of the Gospel message.

For Wesley this continuity was a matter of a priori theological

certainty. In Wesley's nominally Christian England this continuity was not as severely tested as it might have been in other areas, due to the remnants of Christendom which still pervaded all the contexts of daily life. In other settings the harmony between the explicit Gospel message and the work of prevenient grace may have been less obvious. Even so, Wesley believed that in the heart of every person there has been and still are flickers of awareness of their need, inadequacy and guilt, which can lead to repentance and a type of faith, even where the explicit gospel message is unknown.

Given the fallen nature of all persons, such moments of humble self-awareness are the first glimmers of revealed truth with the potential to lead to salvation. The explicit gospel message for Wesley begins at the same place with the call to see the grave reality of one's condition before God and to repent. For Wesley the Gospel only finds its true meaning as "good news" in the face of a deep awareness of human sin. Therefore the message of repentance before the holy character of Christ is the starting point of explicit cooperation between prevenient grace and the Gospel. The Gospel message should evoke a response comparable to Isaiah's self-awareness before God's holiness, and Peter's similar confession before Jesus' power (Luke 5:8).

The <u>fourth</u> question follows this very closely in asking how the doctrine of prevenient grace addresses the dynamics of continuity and discontinuity within the goal-oriented redemptive purposes of God. From what has been said already, it is clear that Wesley did not visualize prevenient grace in an affirming, validating or fulfilling relationship with most persons or most human contexts. The fact that when prevenient

grace is positively received it leads on persistently to its goal of saving faith, is strong evidence that for the majority of the world it has been, and still is, largely rejected.

Wesley believed that prevenient grace as it comes to persons today finds them already fallen. As such, they have first an instinctive inclination to resist grace, and second, in most cases, a long history of habitual and collective resistance or distortion. Therefore, should prevenient grace ever break through this resistance in a person or group of persons, it will be experienced as a radically discontinuous influence in direct proportion to the degree that its previous overtures have been rejected or distorted. The only aspect of continuity with former grace-resistant living will be in the use of much of the same contextually-defined media and relationships to express repentance and love that had formerly expressed rebellion and egocentrism.

The fifth question addressed the possibility of redemption or salvation at a societal or context-wide level. To answer this adequatel would involve a thorough definition of the terms "society" or "context." The following observations may suffice.

As discussed in the introduction, there are countless different ways to define the boundaries and distinctives of collective human experience. They range from relationship through blood kinship ties, to those who share a common language, folklore, skin color, or average yearly income. Potentially each person could have a different idea of the boundaries or centers of his or her dominant context. There are equally diverse definitions of personal contexts provided by others from outside.

But although there is no consensus about which criteria best define relevant groupings, there is still a strong tendency in all people to feel that what impacts them personally is or should be related to the contextual or relational network which they think best describes them. Given the fact that prevenient grace has been at work in all people, the question naturally arises concerning how prevenient grace has been at work in the collective experience of this or that collectively defined entity. For example, what are the implications of prevenient grace for "the poor," or for British society, for the world, or for my tribe? How is prevenient grace active in these categories? How is it leading to the redemption of these collective entities?

For Wesley, the impact of grace on any given context is determined by the collective influence of individual responses. He understood salvation in relational terms, that is, in terms of a distinctly personal, divine-human encounter. This perspective is somewhat problematic in relation to the dominant collectivist emphases of the contextual sciences which significantly inform missiology. In mapping experience, human beings have an acknowledged tendancy to reify abstract concepts, such as "culture" or "society" or "the poor" (Mehan & Woods 1975:11), and also to personify these collective entities. However, in so doing, language can become misleading. For example, as noted in chapter ten (229), missiologists sometimes speak of cultures experiencing "faith." It is only in a very abstract sense that one can speak of the redemption or salvation of any such collective entity in Wesleyan terms. For Wesley the personal dynamic of direct relationship with God through saving faith restricted its meaning to a fundamentally individu-

al vs. collective level. Collective expressions of faith were only the aggregate of on-going individual experiences of new life in Christ.

Difficult as it may be to integrate with the contextual sciences, this fact of Wesley's soteriology is unavoidable even if the non-personal entity is made up of persons, and the salvation process is impacted by social relationships and contextually-defined meanings. Wesley clearly acknowledged that persons find saving faith within their context, and it is through group dynamics within that context that the divine-human relationship is nurtured and expressed. He also believed that Christians can and should exert a real, beneficial influence which may even change parts of the fundamental character of their context from without. But none of these interactions or transformations are equivalent to a societal or context-wide salvation or redemption in the strictest sense of the word.

In Wesley's categories the only way one can speak of a collective salvation or redemption is if every member of that collectivity is in his or her own dynamic saving relationship with Jesus Christ by faith. Likewise, the dominant influence of prevenient grace, properly understood, is to bring all of these individuals into this relationship. While God is indeed responsible for any good in society, and any increase in justice and mercy, this is not the same as prevenient grace, which is always connected with its goal of faith.

Finally, the sixth question asked, what are the practical implications of a Wesleyan view of contextually sensitive ministry today?

The first would be to affirm with Wesley the primacy of the context defined by each person's relationship with God. This is a baldly

theological vs. contextual affirmation. However, this is consistent with Wesley's view of Scripture, the plain and usually literal reading of which was always his primary authority. Wesley interpreted all that he observed of human experience in terms of the universal need for salvation and the on-going offer of grace to all persons. All other needs are secondary to the need for a saving relationship with Christ; and most other needs are derived in one way or other from this primary one. This affirmation would have a clarifying, simplifying, and potentially energizing effect on any ministry today.

One example of this affirmation in practice can be found in the story of Vincent Donovan's powerful ministry among the Maasai people in Tanzania recorded in his book, Christianity Rediscovered (1978). Abandoning all other forms of typical missionary outreach, Donovan opted to focus his attention on the simplest, most unencumbered presentation of the Gospel. Wesley would have saluted the determination Donovan expressed when he said (1978:15):

> I suddenly feel the urgent need to cast aside all theories and discussions . . . and simply go to these people and do the work among them for which I came to Africa.* . . . just go and talk to them about God and the Christian message.

The unique way in which Wesley viewed the primacy of the divine-human context leads to a second, perhaps less obvious, implication. It puts a high premium, not just on proclaiming the universally potential divine-human realtionship, but also on having a sound understanding of human contextuality.

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*Wesley might have added, "and for which Christ came to humanity."

Wesley's confidence in the human freedom in the face of prevenient grace implies that he expected a variety of responses to be represented in any group of people. Although grace is constant, the possibilities of human response, both individual and collective, are almost infinite. It is therefore not enough to concentrate on the primacy of the divine-human relationship without taking into consideration the complexity of human response configurations. The minister who would work in harmony with prevenient grace must be concerned to understand the existing sub-context of grace-response, as it manifests itself in the multiple external contextual expressions that orchestrate life in a particular setting.

Therefore, in a Wesleyan perspective of ministry, single-minded focus on the goal of restored relationship through saving faith is combined with the strongest kind of contextual sensitivity. This is not because the minister hopes to find saving faith within the context itself, but because it is only through the experiences and meaning structures of that context that the Gospel can ever be understood and accepted meaningfully in light of what God has been trying to accomplish in that particular history. From this perspective the contributions of the various contextual sciences become essential partners to mission in a Wesleyan mode, where prevenient grace is taken seriously.

Another reason that both contextual sensitivity and interpretive competence are essential to ministry in Wesleyan a mode derives from Wesley's understanding of post-faith salvation in terms of loving interpersonal relationships: both between God and the Christian, and between the Christian and all other persons. This distinctive characteris-

tic can be most clearly seen in contrast to concepts of the divine-human interaction which are dominated by other dynamics, such as doctrinal truth, ethical conformity or legal metaphors. In Wesley, all of these have their place, but are recognized only as they serve to lead one to the ultimate goal of love for God and fellow human beings.

For Wesley, the love that characterized God's new creation was much more than an emotion. Love for God is expressed in the ordinary life of the Christian, here and now, through conformity to his will. And, the majority of God's will relates to interpersonal relationships. Fulfilling God's will in interpersonal relationships demands, first a divine work of saving faith, which transforms one's orientation to God, oneself, and others; then this must be put into practical expression.

It is at the level of activating and interpreting the practical expression of love that competence in the contextual sciences again becomes significant. Scripture defines <u>part</u> of what loving God and others means in practice, but most of the expressions of these love relationships will be expressed in a unique variety of patterns, which will be contextually determined. For this reason, the tools available to help comprehend the many complex contextual matrices that pattern human behavior are of special interest to someone ministering within a Wesleyan theological base. This is all the more true for those ministering in contexts alien to the one in which they first experienced and grew in saving faith.

Each context, regardless of how it is defined, has potential for creative and unique expressions of God's love, which is largely responsive in character. In Wesley's essay on "The Character of a Methodist"

and his sermon on the "Catholic Spirit," it is clear that he envisioned and welcomed a wide variety of legitimate interpretations of the basic dynamics of love for God. He championed theological and liturgical creativity, while at the same time remaining steadfast in his commitment to what he considered the non-negotiable anchor points of Christianity. These were defined by the primacy of faith-born love for God, the conviction that this love always expressed itself in wholehearted desire to do all God's known will, and the firm belief that God's grace was sufficient to enable a full conformity to his will. Beyond these principles, and their relatively few particular expressions in Scripture, Wesley believed human creativity should operate to its fullest range in seeking contextually appropriate expressions of this love.

A second related emphasis springing from Wesley's understanding of salvation and Christian maturity as love, is the primacy of willful intention. The loving character of a particular act was for Wesley more to be determined by the motive than the act itself.

It would be impossible to justify a willful transgression or neglect of some part of God's known will in terms of loving intentions, but a loving intention can justify a wide variety of unique and previously unknown behaviors. Again, contextual sensitivity and interpretive competence in the Christian minister is crucial, if these heart-intentions are to be accurately understood. This is particularly true in contexts of ministry where the dominant meaning structures are alien to minister. Without adequate interpretive awareness and skills, superficial similarities and dissimilarities to patterns within other contexts can be dangerously misleading. It is impossible to understand adequate-

ly the motives, intentions, and various expressions of love possible within the many human meaning structures from superficial behavior patterns alone.

Robert Schreiter's "semiotic" approach to interpreting human behavior within its specific contextually-defined meanings seems particularly compatible with much in a Wesleyan understanding of contextually sensitive ministry (1985:39ff). Although, Schreiter's missiology is dominated by the paradigms of culture, it seems that his semiotic approach would be applicable within other models as well. The force of his emphasis is upon getting beneath superficial levels of observation in order to understand the meanings of human activity and what they symbolize in their particular setting. Starting with the relational priority of Wesley's theology, it is possible to apply Schreiter's semiotics in order to see the connections between behavior and one's relationship with Christ. Schreiter's approach seems able to deal most effectively with the minute, mundane intricacies of divine-human relationship envisioned by Wesley's concept of all-pervasive grace.

Wesley's concepts of prevenient grace, and its goal of "perfect love" provide an important foundation. They give a remarkably successful theological rational for the full activation of the "contextual sciences" in ministry. The fact of their relativity, and that so far none of the many social and behavioral sciences has proved universally definitive, in no way argues against their place in the service of the Christian mission. What is needed, rather, is a clear concept of their role. This is what the holism of Wesley's soteriology seems so uniquely equipped to provide.

Evaluation

A Wesleyan understanding of the relationship between theology and the contextual sciences is clearly not the only rationale for a working relationship between the contextual sciences and mission. It stands on some Scripturally-based affirmations which some may not choose to give the same interpretation or the same priority. Others might question the legitimacy of starting with Scripture at all. Wesley simply does not. He starts with the harshest view of human sin and the highest vision of divine salvation. The combination of these two extremes create a uniquely open perspective.

The reason for research and expertise in the contextual sciences is because God's grace is a universal part of human experience throughout the history of the species. All that we see of collective human existence is largely determined by a long history of responses to grace. Likewise, the history of every individual is made up of his or her own series of responses to the continuous overtures of God, against the background of surrounding contextual responses.

This grace comes to people as they are, speaking through human experience -- both intrapersonal and external. It is interpreted in the only way possible, that is, through existing meaning structures. If it is to have its intended effect and fulfill God's eternal purpose it must meet with a series of positive intentional responses, and be nurtured in a context of support congenial to these meaning structures. This is true even when meanings themselves must eventually undergo fundamental change in the process.

In witness and proclamation the representatives of the Gospel are to work in harmony with prevenient grace. It would be tragic should they misinterpret its effects and find themselves at cross-purposes with what God has been trying to accomplish before their arrival. Outside their own context the success of this endeavor will depend on their ability to discern the patterns of grace and human response most likely alien to their own. Melville Horne's recommendation of a two-year learning and listening period prior to proclaiming the Gospel is an early practical expression of the priority to work with prevenient grace.

Certainly Scripture offers significant insights into human need that are universal. It reveals the fact that most human responses have been negative, and that the first work of grace usually must be to lead persons to repentance for these rejections of "light." But this is far from a simple matter. What form has this particular rejection of grace taken? How is it understood? What does repentance mean and how should it be expressed in a meaning structure alien to one's own? Here, again, sensitivity, time and the contextual sciences are the minister's or missionary's allies.

Practically, it may have appeared that Wesley bull-dozed his way through accepted contextual norms in his day. Certainly, his field-preaching was innovative, but it was not alien. In fact, it was a method "whose time had come," as it were. The class barriers, among many other obstacles, had rendered the church inaccessible to spiritually hungry people. The social implications of England's burgeoning industialization saw thousands of people displaced from rural parishes and congregated around mines and factories. Preaching in the open-air

to huge crowds was truly "indigenous" to a society in this kind of contextual disruption and transition. Likewise, Wesley's use of small group meetings and formation of "societies" showed similar contextual sensitivity to the needs of displaced, newly-urbanized people. Wesley's methods arose out of response to existing needs and opportunities,[1] but without compromising his theological foundation.

Not just at the start, but at each step in Wesley's ordo salutis contextual sensitivity is necessary. Even though Wesley visualized saving faith as a gift from God, bearing the marks of the Giver, more than the particular distinctive characteristics of the receiver, the dominant mark of the Giver is love. And love always defies final definition. In spite of much explicit material in Scripture as to what love means, it remains forever an open-ended concept, such that "eye has not seen" the many expressions it may yet take in human experience. Understanding of its many genuine expressions, as well as its counterfeits, will be greatly enhanced by the contextual sciences.

In most of his ministry, Wesley worked within a societal and

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1. Wesley's own remarks prefacing his "Plain Account of the People called Methodists" merit quotation in this regard (Works 9:254):

> But I must premise, that as [the early Methodists] had not the least expectation at first of anything like what has since followed, so they had no previous design or plan at all, but everything arose just as the occasion offered. They saw or felt some impending or pressing evil, or some good end necessary to be pursued. And many times they fell unawares on the very thing which secured the good, or removed the evil. At other times they consulted on the probable means, following only common sense and Scripture -- though they generally found, in looking back, something in Christian antiquity, likewise, very nearly parallel thereto. (emphasis added)

cultural context, with which, multi-faceted as it was, he was intimately familiar. His successors have not always shared either the "advantage" of this kind of "field" or the same degree of Wesley's loving sensitivity and expertise. Facing both the increasingly complex nature of human contextuality, and their own limited capacities for full understanding, contemporary missionaries can rely on the presence of God in prevenient grace. But more practically, they can respond meaningfully to their certainty of this presence in two fundamental ways: first, by gaining every tool with which to better understand God's work in all people and align themselves with it; second, and most importantly, by ensuring that the primary goal of genuine, transforming, dynamic, saving faith defines and prioritizes all their efforts.

APPENDIX A

A Plan
of the
Society
for the
Establishment of Missions among the Heathens[1]

I. Every Person who subscribes Two Guineas yearly, or more, is to be admitted a Member of the Society.

II. A General Meeting shall be held annually, on the last Tuesday in January.

III. The first General Meeting shall be held on the last Tuesday in January, 1784, at No. 11, in West-street, near the Seven Dials, London, at Three o'Clock in the Afternoon.

IV. At every General Meeting a Committee of Seven, or more, shall be chosen by the Majority of the Subscribers, to transact the Business of the Society for the ensuing Year.

V. The General Meeting shall receive and examine the Accounts of the Committee for the preceding Year, of all Sums paid to the Use of the Society, of the Purpose to which the Whole, or any Part thereof, shall have been applied, and also the Report of all they have done, and the Advices they have received.

VI. The Committee, or the Majority of them, shall have Power, First, To call in the Sums subscribed, or any Part thereof, and to receive all Collections, Legacies, or other voluntary Contributions. Secondly, To agree with any they shall approve, who may offer to go abroad, either as Missionaries, or in any Civil Employment. Thirdly, To procure the best Instruction which can be obtained for such Persons, in the Language of the Country for which they are intended, before they go abroad. Fourthly, to provide for their Expences, in going and continuing abroad, and for their return Home, after such Time, and under such Circumstances, as may be thought most expedient. Fifthly, To print the Scriptures, or so much thereof, as the Funds of the Society may admit,

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1. This copy of Coke's "Plan" replicates as closely as possible the format of the original document. Original punctuation, capitalization and spellings have been preserved.

for the Use of any Heathen Country. And, Sixthly, to do every other Act which to them may appear necessary, so far as the common Stock of the Society will allow, for carrying the Design of the Society into Execution.

VII. The Committee shall keep an Account of the Subscribers Names, and all Sums received for the Use of the Society, together with such Extracts of the Entries of their Proceedings and Advices, as may shew those who are concerned, all that has been done both at Home and Abroad: which State shall be signed by at least Three of the Committee.

VIII. The Committee for the New Year shall send a Copy of the Report for the past Year, to all Members of the Society who were not present at the preceding General Meeting, and (free of Postage) to every Clergyman, Minister, or other Person, from whom any Collection, Legacy, or other Benefaction, shall have been received, within the Time concerning which the Report is made.

IX. The Committee, if they see it necessary, shall have Power to choose a Secretary.

X. The Committee shall at no Time have any Claim on the Members of the Society, for any Sum which may exceed the common Stock of the Society.

N.B. Those who subscribe before the first General Meeting, and whom it may be convenient to attend, are desired to favour the General Meeting by Letter (according to the above Direction) with any important Remarks which may occur to them on the Business, that the Subscribers may be assisted as far as possible, in settling the Rules of the Society to the Satisfaction of all concerned.

We have been already favoured with the Names of the following Subscribers, viz.

[Amount subscribed in pounds, shillings, pence]	L.	s.	d.
DR. COKE	2	2	0
Miss Eliza Johnson, of Bristol	2	2	0
Rev. Mr. Simpson, Macclesfield	2	2	0
Mr. Rose, of Dorking,	2	2	0
Mr. Horton, of London,	2	2	0
Mr. Ryley, of ditto	2	2	0
Mr. Jay, of ditto,	2	2	0
Mr. Dewey, of ditto,	2	2	0
Mr. Mandell, of Bath	2	2	0
Mr. Jaques, of Wallingford	2	2	0
Mr. Batting, of High Wickham	2	2	0
Mr. John Clarke, of Newport, in the Isle of Wight,	2	2	0
Miss Eliza Johnson, of Bristol,	2	2	0
Mr. Barton, of the Isle of Wight,	2	2	0
Mr. Henry Brooke, of Dublin,	2	2	0

Master and Miss Blashford, of ditto,	4	4	0
Mrs. Kirkover, of ditto,	2	2	0
Mr. Smith, Russian Merchant, of London,	5	5	0
Mr. D'Olier, of Dublin,	2	2	0
Mrs. Smyth, of ditto,	2	2	0
The Rev. Mr. Fletcher, of Madeley,	2	2	0
Miss Salmon,	2	2	0
Mr. Houlton, of London, an occasional Subscriber,	10	10	0
Mrs. King, of Dublin,	2	2	0

To all the Real Lovers of Mankind.

The present Institution is so agreeable to the finest Feelings of Piety and Benevolence, that little need be added for its Recommendation. The Candid of every Denomination, (even those who are entirely unconnected with the Methodists, and are determined to be so,) will acknowledge the amazing change which our Preaching has wrought upon the Ignorant and uncivilized at least, throughout these Nations; and they will admit, that the Spirit of a Missionary must be of the most zealous, most devoted, and self-denying Kind; nor is any thing more required to constitute a Missionary for the Heathen Nations, than good Sense, Integrity, great Piety, and amazing Zeal. Men, possessing all these Qualifications in high Degree, we have among us; and I doubt not but some of these will accept of the arduous Undertaking, not counting their Lives dear, if they may but promote the Kingdom of Christ, and the present and eternal Welfare of their Fellow Creatures; and we trust nothing shall be wanting, as far as Time, Strength, and Abilities will admit, to give the fullest and highest satisfaction to the Promoters of the Plan, on the part of

Your devoted Servants,

THOMAS COKE,
THOMAS PARKER.

Those who are willing to promote the Institution are desired to send their Names, Places of Abode, and Sums subscribed, to Rev. Dr. Coke, in London, or Thomas Parker, Esq., Barrister at Law, in York.

[The following letter from Thomas Coke to John Fletcher was written on the fly-leaf of this copy of the Plan, addresses to Fletcher at Madeley.]

near Plymouth, Jan. 6 1784.

My very dear Sir

Lest Mr. Parker sh'.[ould] neglect to send you one of our Plans for the establishing of Foreign Missions, I take the Liberty of doing it. Ten subscribers more, of two guineas p[e]r. ann.[um] have favoured me with their names. If you can get a few subscribers more, we shall be obliged to you.

We have now a very wonderful outpouring of the Spirit in the West of Cornwall. I have been obliged to make a Winter-Campaign of it & preach here & there out of Doors.

I beg my affectionate Respects to Mrs. Fletcher. I intreat you to pray for

Your most affectionate Friend & Brother

Thomas Coke

APPENDIX B

[Title page]

An
Address
to the
Pious and Benevolent
Proposing an
Annual Subscription
for the
Support of Missionaries
in
The Highlands and Adjacent Islands of Scotland,
The Isles of Jersey, Guernsey, and Newfoundland,
The West Indies and the Provinces of Nova Scotia
and Quebec.[1]

By Thomas Coke, LL. D.

[Endorsement by John Wesley]

Bristol, March 12, 1786

Dear Sir,

I greatly approve your proposal for raising a subscription in order to send missionaries to the highlands of Scotland, the Islands of Guernsey and Jersey, the Leeward Islands, Quebec, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland. It is not easy to conceive the extreme want there is, in all those places, of men that will not count their lives dear unto themselves, so they may testify to the Gospel of the grace of God.

I am,
Dear Sir,
Your affectionate Brother,

JOHN WESLEY

To Dr. Coke.

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1. This copy of Coke's "Address" replicates as closely as possible the format of the original document. Original punctuation, capitalization and spellings have been preserved. The underlined phrases represent italic type in the original. Paragraph numbers in the body of the text have been added.

[Main Text]

An
Address
to the
Pious and Benevolent,
&c. &c. &c.

Dearly beloved in the Lord,

[1] Some time past I took the liberty of addressing you, in behalf of a mission intended to be established in the British dominions in Asia; and many of you very generously entered into that important plan [see Appendix A]. We have not indeed lost sight of it at present; on the contrary, we have lately received a letter of encouragement from a principal gentleman in the province of Bengal. But the providence of God has lately opened to us so many doors nearer home, that Mr. Wesley thinks it imprudent to hazard at present the lives of any of our preachers, by sending them to so great a distance, and amidst so many uncertainties and difficulties; when so large a field of action is afforded us in countries to which we have so much easier admittance, and where the success, through the blessing of God, is more or less certain.

[2] We cannot but be sensible of the fallen state of Christendom, and the extensive room for labour which faithful ministers may find in every country therein. But some of the nations which are called Christian, are deeper sunk in ignorance and impiety than others; and even of the most enlightened, various parts are still buried in the grossest darkness.

[3] No kingdom under heaven, I believe, has been more blessed with the light of the gospel that North Britain. Numerous have been the men of most eminent piety and abilities, whom God in his providence and grace has been pleased to raise among that people. And yet, in the Highlands, and adjacent Islands, many scores, perhaps I may say hundreds of thousands, are little better than the rudest barbarians.* The state of this unhappy people has been fully laid before the Public by a very laudable society in Edinburgh, which was formed for the very purpose of spreading religion in those benighted parts. But the members of this benevolent institution have candidly acknowledged their great insufficiency for this important undertaking, for want both of money and men. And indeed the grand design of that society, which is almost entirely directed to the establishment of schools, will by no means interfere with the present plan. We may, by the grace of God, supply

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* A late writer employed by the government to estimate the improvements which may be made in the fisheries in that part of Scotland, and who has been indefatigable in his researches, scruples not to assert it as his confirmed sentiment, that the people in that country who answer this description, are not fewer than half a million.

their defects; and while they are leading the rising generation to the light of the truth, we may, under the divine blessing, be arresting those of maturer age in their present career of sin and folly. The Lord seems to be pointing out our way in the present instance, for he has raised up a zealous young man, well versed in Erse (the language spoken by the people of whom we are now treating), to whom Mr. Wesley has given an unlimited commission to visit the Highlands and adjacent Islands of Scotland. We have also one or two more in our view, who are masters of the Erse language, who, we have reason to believe, would accept of a similar commission. But the charges would be considerable, and our present regular expenses in Scotland, beyond what the poverty of our Scotch societies can afford, are full as great as our contingent fund will bear. This is therefore the first object of the present institution -- To establish and support an Erse Mission in the Highlands and adjacent Islands of Scotland.

[4] The Isles of Jersey and Guernsey make the second object of our institution. The Lord has been pleased, by our much respected brother Mr. Brackenbury, to begin a very promising work in those islands. Several societies have been formed: and the Lord has also raised up a very sensible and zealous young man, whose native language is the French, and who is likely to be highly useful to the cause of God. He is now stationed in Guernsey, where some assistance has been already given him to supply his necessary wants, and probably more will be yet required. In Jersey Mr. Brackenbury bears the whole burden of the expence at present but we cannot expect this to be always the case. No doubt but the larger societies will soon be enabled to support their own expences: but still, as the work increases, the infant societies will stand in need of assistance. This is therefore our second view in the present institution -- To nurse and carry on the work which is now breaking forth among the French Protestants in our islands of Jersey and Guernsey.

[5] The third object we have in view, is our West India Islands, where a field is opened to us among the negroes beyond anything that could have been expected. Eleven hundred blacks have been already united in society in the Island of Antigua through the successful labours of Mr. Baxter; and the greatest part of them, we have reason to believe, are converted to God. But we have only that single minister in those islands, Mr. Lamburt, whom we sent from the States, being obliged to return on account of his ill state of health. Nor can our brethren in the States afford us any assistance in the West India islands, the call for preachers being so great on the continent. In the island of St. Christopher's we have received considerable encouragement. And the planters in general are constrained to acknowledge, that the negroes who are united to us and to the Moravians, are the most laborious and faithful servants they have: which favourable sentiment, through the blessing of God, has laid open the whole country to our labours among the blacks; and we seem to want nothing but preachers, under the divine influence, to gather in many thousands of them. And these islands seem to have a peculiar claim on the inhabitants of Britain. Our country is enriched by the labours of the poor slaves who cultivate the soil, and surely the

least compensation we can make them, is to endeavor to enrich them in return with the riches of grace. But the grand consideration to the children of God, is the value of the souls of these negroes, a set of people utterly despised by all the world, except the Methodists and the Moravians. And yet I have no doubt but a most glorious gospel-harvest would soon be displayed to our view among that miserable people, if they were sufficiently supplied with gospel-ministers. This is therefore the third object of our institution -- To establish and support missions in our West India islands.

[6] The provinces of Nova Scotia and Quebec and the island of Newfoundland, make the fourth and last object of the present plan. We have lately sent a missionary to Harbour Grace in Newfoundland, and his labours have been blessed, but his single endeavors are not likely to carry the work of God to that extent which every pious soul must wish for. In Nova Scotia we have about three hundred whites and two hundred blacks in society according to the last accounts, but have only three traveling preachers for the whole province; so that most of our congregations have preaching but once in a month. In the province of Quebec a few pious soldiers have formed societies at Quebec and Montreal on the Methodist plan, among whom we have reason to believe that our preachers would be gladly received.

[7] Such an open door has not been known perhaps for many ages, as is now presented to us on the continent of America. And it has long been an adjudged case in our conferences, that "when God is at any time pleased to pour out his spirit more abundantly, we ought at that time to send more labourers than usual into that part of the harvest."* If it be a principal mark of true wisdom in temporal things to watch every opportunity -- how much more in spiritual, which are of infinitely greater importance? How attentive should we be to the times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord, to improve to the utmost all those blessed occasions. Nor should any lover of Zion object to the distance of those countries from us. Oceans are nothing to God, and they should be no obstruction to his people in respect to the love they should bear one towards another. This therefore is the fourth and last object of the present institution -- To send missionaries to our provinces in America and the island of Newfoundland.

[8] A particular account of the missions, with any letters or extracts of letters from the missionaries or others, that are worthy of publication, shall be printed as soon as possible after every one of our annual conferences, and a copy presented to every subscriber: in which also the receipts and disbursements of the preceding year, with an alphabetical list of names of the subscribers (except where it is otherwise desired), shall be laid before the Public. The assistants of our circuits respectively will be so kind as to bring the money subscribed to the ensuing conference and so from year to year.

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* See the large Minutes of our Conference Q 9th.

[9] The preaching of the gospel is an object of the greatest importance; and the present state of mankind must cause very frequent and painful sensations to the truly pious -- that the kingdom of Jesus Christ should be circumscribed by such narrow bounds, and Satan rule so great a part of the world; but "how shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach except they be sent? As it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!" And as the Lord is pleased in general to carry on his blessed work by second causes, let the sacred ardour of divine love kindle in your souls, my beloved brethren, a holy zeal of being honoured instruments in promoting of it, according to your several stations. Numerous and wonderful are the promises in sacred writ which assure us that "the fullness of the Gentiles shall come in:" That "all shall know the Lord from the least to the greatest:" That "righteousness shall cover the earth as the waters the sea:" That "the Heathen shall be an inheritance for the Messiah, the uttermost parts of the earth his possession, and all the kingdoms of the world the kingdoms of our Lord and Christ." We know not, it is true, the particular time. However, let us all, as far as lies in our power contribute to this great event, and prepare the way for it.

[10] The Roman Catholics have manifested astonishing zeal in the missions they have established in China and other parts of the East. Their contributions for the purpose have been almost boundless: And shall Protestants be less zealous for the glory of God, when their religion is so much more pure. Alas! this is really the case. Nor let us object that the Romanists are richer than we -- that even crowned heads have used their utmost influence in the former case. But let us rather remember that God works by the smallest means, yea he delights so to do. He rejoices to "perfect strength in weakness, and to ordain praise out of the mouths of babes and sucklings." Hitherto the Lord has blessed us in this very way, raising very large and lively societies from very small beginnings. And if we engage in the present undertaking in the spirit of faith, our endeavors shall be successful: they shall spread like Elijah's cloud, and a gracious rain shall descend on the inhabitants of the earth. Let us do all with prayer and thanksgiving, and that God who never fails his people, will assuredly use us for his own glory.

[11] Blessed be God! our spiritual resources are amazing. Numerous, I am fully persuaded, are the preachers among us, who, in the true spirit of apostles, count all things but dung, that they may win Christ, and win souls to him; who carry their lives in their hands, and long to spend and be spent in their Master's glorious cause. Let us therefore endeavor to draw forth these resources, and spread them out to the uttermost. Then shall the little leaven imperceptibly win its widening way, till it has leavened the whole lump of mankind. And while we are unitedly watering the whole world around us, our own souls shall be watered again: the Methodist Connection shall become a seminary to fill the vineyard of Christ with devoted labourers, and be made the most

valuable, the most extensive blessing, not only to the present age, but to the generations that are yet to come.

I am,

Dearly beloved in the Lord,

With great respect,

Your humble and most affectionate

Brother and Servant,

THOMAS COKE.

London,
March 13, 1786

Appendix C

This tribute to Thomas Coke is taken from Joshua Marsden's The Narrative of a Mission (1816:119n, 120n) and is transcribed in the same form and spelling as the original.

> That this holy man had his failings we will not pretend to deny, but they were such as arose from greatness of soul: let those who look at his bird's eye errors through the microscope of severity tell us -- Where is the man in the present age, who has done as much for the cause of God than Thomas Coke? Who has traveled more miles? Who has oftener crossed the Atlantic Ocean, to carry the light of salvation to the Western world? Who has, with such a spirit of condescending charity, laid aside the gentleman, the philosopher, and the scholar, to teach negro slaves, and soften by the healing balm of salvation, the rigours of their captivity? Who has more cheerfully borne the burning sun of the equator, or the rage of the marine-tempest, that he might carry the consolation of peace to thousands of the distressed? Witness ye mighty forests of the western world! witness how Coke, amidst the silence of the sylvan temple, has called the cottagers of the wilderness beneath the shade of some maple, to behold the Sinner's Friend. He preached the gospel from the Mississippi to the bay of Ponobscot, and from the Chesapeake to the waters of Ohio. Where is the man who was more lavish of life, more abundant in labours, and more willing to suffer? To the ardour of a seraph he added the wings of a dove; and beside crossing the Atlantic sixteen times, how often has he crossed the turbulent stormy British Channel and the Irish Sea? Who can stand up, and in the presence of Coke, put this inscription upon his own brow: -- "in labours more abundant?" His means were large; his charity was larger; but his heart was larger than all. He was the most indefatigable Missionary that this or any other former age has produced; and, had he lived in times of great veneration for such labours, he might have been canonized as a saint of the first class, or dignified with the title of an apostle. To the toil-degraded Africans he was an unparalleled benefactor; and if his labour to succour these outcasts of men are not ranked with Clarkson's and Wilberforce's, it is only because they are less known. These gentlemen nobly broke

their civil chains; he preached deliverance to their captive souls, and brought thousands of them into the glorious liberty of the sons of God. The preaching of the cross was the darling of his heart, and few manifested equal ardour in dispensing the great truths of salvation. If he had not the commanding eloquence of Whitfield, his discourses were impressive and affectionate: the zeal of his life was not the blaze of a meteor, nor the coruscation of a northern light; it was steady as the brightness of a lamp, and as constant as the fire of the magi. In the decline of life, he manifested the ardour of youth; and ceased not to preach, beg, travel, and write with unabated diligence. To the foreign missions, he was the almoner of the bounty of thousands; and if he wanted that correct calculating prudence which the rigid economy of a Franklin might have suggested, it was because his great soul considered every pound wisely wasted, which saved an immortal spirit. Those who blamed him in this respect never moved in the same sphere; and those who slighted him made it manifest that they valued his friendship and labours much less than their own money. He was the drudge of charity and by the warmth of his solicitations, often became obtrusive to the parsimonious, who afraid of their purses, wished to circumscribe his usefulness. But he is gone to answer to his own master for the management of his stewardship, who, I doubt not, has put his valde probo upon his faithful servant's labours, and graciously welcomed him to the joy of his Lord.

Appendix D

The following hymn was composed by Joshua Marsden to encourage the Black Christians of Bermuda (Marsden 1816:156-157):

Mercy, O thou bleeding Saviour,
Listen to a black man's prayer;
Others feel thy smiling favour,
Others of thy bounty share.

And shall Africans be slighted?
That be far, O Lord, from thee!
Black and brown are all invited;
Gospel-grace for all is free!

Yes, Black may find salvation
Through the Lambs' atoning blood;
Ev'ry man of ev'ry nation
May become the child of God.
Jew and Gentile, he is able,
Pagan, Scythian to save;
Whether white, or browm, or sable:
For the world his life he gave!

Thanks to Jesus for his kindness;
Black men join the sacred lay;
He hath heal'd our grievous blindness,
Taught our feet the glorious way.
He hath brought salvation to us;
Hallelujah to the Lamb!
Sent his Spirit to renew us;
Glory, glory to his name!

Glory, honour, and salvation
To the Saviour now belong;
Ev'ry kindred, ev'ry nation,
Join the universal song.
Asia and Ethiopia,
With Columbia's favour race,
Join the hymn with fair Europia;
Let the world the Saviour bless.

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* All references to quotations from Wesley's published Works, Letters, or Journals are taken from the 1976 Bicentennial edition, Frank Baker, editor-in-chief, unless otherwise designated by the editor's name, e.g. (Jackson, Works 3:245) or (Curnock, Journal 2:244). The copyright date is omitted in the citation; the first numeral refers to the volume number; the second, to the page.

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